

worldview

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VIETNAM: THE TREACHEROUS DEMANDS

What is U.S. policy in Vietnam? And what part does the concerned citizen play in determining, modifying, or rejecting that policy? These questions, which are inextricably related, have been forced upon the national consciousness in a particularly harsh way by the present situation in Vietnam.

The decision to strike north of the seventeenth parallel has raised once again, and still more sharply, the question of why Americans are in Vietnam. The official reasons given are many. The most charitable thing one can say about those presented in the State Department's White Paper on Vietnam is that they are inadequate. They do not answer the most probing and serious questions, nor do they quiet those misgivings which find ever stronger voice in this country.

To say that the American presence in South Vietnam is a response to a request of the South Vietnamese people is to attempt to cover the ugly and complex situation with polite fiction. It is, in addition, a fiction that serves no purpose for it conceals nothing, deceives no one. The fact is that only a limited number of persons in South Vietnam are in a position to make their wishes known. And the relation of the U.S. to the expanding list of South Vietnam leaders is a wearying story which it is unnecessary to rehearse. It is, further, unconvincing to say that the Vietnamese war is "far from being a civil war." It is more than that, of course, but one of the frustrating elements in the American effort to impose stability is civil conflict that can accurately be termed war. If the U.S. were to withdraw, that element would remain. While an increasing number of the Viet Cong forces are, apparently, from North Vietnam, these forces originally included a very high percentage of South Vietnamese.

We could well begin any account of our presence in Vietnam by saying we were stuck with a bad situation. Once in, with our pres-

tige and undeveloped policy committed, we found no reasonable and safe way of terminating it. Fleshed out with detail, and regarded only as a penultimate reason, this has more to recommend it than is ordinarily allowed. But there remains the problem of the ultimate reason for staying there. Putting aside as useless fiction the pretense that we are concerned only with allowing the South Vietnamese to determine their own future, we are left with variants of related but distinct policies. One is that we are really choosing this ground as that upon which to oppose the stated objectives of mainland China: the subjugation of the countries of Southeast Asia. If we show ourselves unable or unwilling to carry to a successful conclusion this irregular war, we prove ourselves unable to cope with other "wars of national liberation." Chinese hegemony would mean American diminishment, and we would have begun our slow withdrawal, our gradual turning inward, our inevitable decline.

The second theory, closely allied, is that the war in Vietnam is best seen as one battle, but a crucial battle, in our struggle with world-wide communism. It is not only, or even primarily, Chinese imperialism that we must fear; it is the gradual absorption of other countries into the Communist camp. Whether directed from Peiping or Hanoi, a strong victory for communism now would revive its obviously battered and flagging spirit. If we are forced out of Vietnam we have already weakened our defenses in every area where allied and Communist forces oppose each other.

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Even apart from the confusion, uncertainties and differences of opinion that are attendant upon making decisions about a problem as intractable as Vietnam, there are sound and evident reasons why official spokesmen for U.S. policy cannot present a full and open account of U.S. plans and policies. If we assume, as some

people have, that the bombing of targets in North Vietnam is intended to lead to negotiation, some of those reasons are immediately clear. Negotiations are possible only when there is something to negotiate and both sides are willing. Before the bombings in North Vietnam, our fortunes were so low that we had little with which to negotiate, and there was no reason for the opposition to negotiate themselves out of a military victory. The bombings help to redress that imbalance. But the willingness to negotiate must also be present and if no signals come from Hanoi there is no place to start. It would simply reverse whatever progress has been made to call for negotiations without some assurance that there would be a reasonable response. We have as yet no such assurance.

If this assumption about U.S. policy has any validity it is clear that many plans and contingencies must be worked out covertly. One cannot inform the U.S. public without informing the world. The citizen is pushed further and further away from those decisions that will determine the future. He has once again come up against what Robert J. Manning has termed "the treacherous demands that the facts of international life impose on our democratic society."

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What is the concerned citizen to do when faced with "these treacherous demands"? Sympathize with the plight of the man who is forced to make the decision? Turn the task over to the experts and forget about it? Accept the political impotence of the average person as part of the price our society demands? Or express one's views as strongly as possible, realizing their limitations, and become a part of the problem for the decision maker?

This is a constant question, but Vietnam has

presented it to many people in a particularly acute form. Suggestions, criticism, demands for clarification, expressions of confusion—all have come pouring in to the White House. Because so many of the voices come from religious groups one Washington clergyman was moved to say that he didn't know any clergyman in the country whose views on Vietnam were worth a hoot. The basis for this judgment was, of course, that clergymen are no more informed than other citizens about the situation in Vietnam, and the opinions of non-experts have little value. There is no doubt that he has a real point. Amateur opinions about technical problems are rarely helpful.

More recently, at a vigil protesting American military participation in Vietnam, Mother Mary Berchmans, a nun from the college of New Rochelle, N. Y. said, "While I cannot offer a program for what the State and Defense Departments should do, there are some things I personally cannot do or, by silence, in effect support. I think the churches have to witness to the human and moral issues involved. Even if we cannot make a complete judgment on all social, economic and military factors, we can still make a moral judgment on the war's basic inhumanity."

Mother Mary Berchmans, too, has a point, although our State Department may find it difficult to evaluate and impossible to use. Taken together, the statements of the nun and of the Washington clergyman point out the weaknesses in our attempts to discuss political decisions in ethical terms. We cannot, quite obviously, all become experts in the disciplines necessary to arrive at sound military and political decision. But neither can we simply withdraw from political involvement. We clearly need, as a people, more and better public discussion that attempts to relate our proclaimed principles to political deeds.

J. F.

in the magazines

What should be the limits of American intervention in Vietnam? And what are the alternatives? As we go to press, these are some of the reactions to the questions which were posed most forcefully last month with the announcement of "retaliatory" raids by United States and South Vietnamese troops upon North Vietnam military targets. At this moment the situation is uncertain enough—and unstable enough—

that it can rapidly shift and outdistance these views. But among these views are those that will help to determine that shift, whenever it takes place.

"Vietnam cannot be judged as an isolated phenomenon. The truth is that an American defeat in Vietnam will embolden the Communists and their allies