VIETNAM: THE SHIFTING CONTOURS

What Has Become of the Political Basis for U.S. Involvement?

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The carefully graduated increases in manpower and in the intensity of bombing attacks and the well-publicized U.S. diplomatic efforts for negotiations, make it appear—at least as I write this—that the United States is conducting in Vietnam a well-controlled and limited military operation.

This impression of limitation and control, implying as it does the discriminating application of military power in the service of political ends, is morally soothing. It is nevertheless an illusory impression which cannot avoid being exposed as the war progresses. For the underlying fact of the U.S. commitment in Vietnam is that its objective is no longer the politics of South Vietnam. The South Vietnamese government, unable to formulate and execute a plan of its own, continues to exist only in the most precarious unstable form.

The original political justification of a viable non-Communist government has therefore ceased to have relevance to the military effort. It has been superseded by another justification which is at once more easily understood and less tortuously complicated in execution; it is very simply that the United States must follow to completion what it commits itself to do.

The signals from Saigon and Washington indicating that the United States is now ready to take on the main burden of combat (thus reversing the former roles of this nation and South Vietnam) are only the inevitable outcome of a situation which has been implicit in Washington's policy for some time. The formulation of the American role as "assisting" and "advising" in an essentially Vietnamese war was of course meaningless as long as it was accompanied by the assertion that the U.S. could not allow South Vietnam to fall to the Viet Cong. This obvious contradiction could be evaded only so long as Washington could maintain an optimistic attitude toward the war.

With the collapse of optimism, then, has also come the collapse of the political basis of the war as it was previously stated. And what was formerly obscured by the formulation of the U.S. role as advisory is now indisputably clear: the Vietnamese war has a logic of its own which it obeys regardless of the desire of those on either side to keep it under control. That logic is one of inevitable expansion.

The U.S. operation there can no longer be called a limited war in the proper sense of that term, for it does not fulfill the conditions which have been established in traditional moral thought as guidelines for ensuring that the regrettable necessity of military force does not degenerate into aimless destruction and violence. Two such guidelines were offered by Robert Osgood in his study, *Limited War*, a few years ago: the principle of political primacy and the principle of proportional use of force. Together they merely uphold the elementary proposition that force assumes a moral character only so long as it is directed and controlled by a valid political objective to which it can be related realistically. It follows that all other use of force is merely violence, regardless of the benevolent intentions of those who give it effect.

Whatever political goals once complicated the military struggle in Vietnam are rapidly fading from sight as pretense is abandoned. The United States has apparently determined that it will not be moved from Vietnam without first defeating decisively the Viet Cong and their allies. Such a military victory might require 300,000 men; it might require eventually more than a million. But whatever is required will be dispatched by the United States and whatever aerial bombing is deemed necessary in support of this effort will be done. The hope for a negotiated settlement, so loudly proclaimed here at home, would have significance only in the circumstances that the enemy is ready to give up, i.e., that he is militarily defeated.

Henry Graff's report on a conversation with the President on how decisions on Vietnam are made (New York Times Magazine, July 4, 1965) illuminates the President's thinking about the moral problem of U.S. policy. In it Professor Graff tells us that

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the President lies awake at night imagining how he would feel if he were asked to send his child to Vietnam, that he grieves at the loss of each American soldier killed, and that he wrestles with each decision to bomb or send more troops.

One cannot doubt the gravity with which the President pronounced the words, "It is not easy to send Americans to the jungles of Vietnam," nor can one doubt the genuine agony which he feels when he does so. Yet the moral emptiness of the President's deliberations is painfully obvious when this wishful monologue ends, according to Professor Graff's account, as follows: "Americans in Vietnam, the President said, could not be 'tucking tail' and coming home. It was his responsibility, he said, to decide how to avoid this necessity."

Now, it is not reasonable to expect that the President or any other responsible official will think explicitly in the terms of moral theory. But unless their thinking is informed by some sense of proportion about ends and means of policy, the policy-making process will be cut off from its moral roots. In the conception of moral responsibility here attributed to the President, that sense is absent. The moral content of decision-making is apparently thought to be fulfilled in the personal identification of the President with the tragedy of each individual affected. There is no question of weighing the costs represented in a small way by those tragedies against the avoidance of "tucking tail."

The President's remark is merely his own way of saying that the United States cannot withdraw from Vietnam before some semblance of victory is achieved without losing an intolerable degree of prestige. The question of how much prestige would be lost is beside the point, for the answer can only be that however much it is it would be intolerable.

This concern for prestige, having been translated into a military requirement for victory, is thus an absolute. The agonizing which the President goes through each day is therefore merely a preliminary to asking how much more force is in fact needed in view of the military requirement.

The President has given sanction to the autonomy of military action in the name of national prestige, thereby giving to the latter an almost metaphysical status. Richard Rovere, observing this development in official thinking, recently wrote, "Government is power and power cannot disentangle itself from the requirements of its own survival or from those of its pride, which is spoken of sometimes as 'honor,' sometimes as 'prestige.'"

The relationship between pride and prestige is much closer than we normally suspect. It can be expressed by the principle that it is often national pride which determines what conception of prestige or honor will be attached to any particular policy. When notions of honor and prestige are invoked in justification of policies they should therefore be treated with some skepticism, for they are quite likely to exaggerate what actually happens in the minds of other national leaders and will probably have little to do with the moral requirements inherent in the situation.

At its extreme, the argument from prestige claims that the American promise would be worthless once the United States were to pull out from Vietnam, for its statements would then no longer be "credible." It is an argument peculiarly adapted to the purposes of those who see the United States not as a mere nation among nations but as the chosen instrument for the pacification of the planet. It is one of those propositions which sounds so tough and businesslike that few have the temerity to challenge it.

What is at issue in Vietnam is not the relationship of the United States and the South Vietnamese Government, which has existed only by U.S. political, military and economic support for years. Nor, despite the President's fears, is the issue whether the U.S. has the power to defeat the military aspect of a guerrilla movement by committing enough manpower and enough firepower.

The issue is whether or not it remains politically wise to do so in a situation which is no longer bounded by politically meaningful objectives. To admit that it is not worthwhile is not a reflection on either our power or our pledges; it is a measure of our political and moral judgment.

Considerations of prestige are a legitimate concern of this nation, for prestige is an inevitable as-
pect of every nation's foreign policy. To be sure that the true state of our nation's military capabilities are understood abroad, for example, has long been recognized as necessary in order to discourage the miscalculated use of power by the enemy. But the proper concern for prestige must be the communication of the facts of power already possessed. To pursue a bad policy in quest of greater prestige or in fear of the loss of prestige is as morally abhorrent as a policy which seeks power for its own sake.

To justify policy on the basis of "military necessity" is therefore merely an evasion of the real source of motivation, which is national pride. And the same evasion operates in the notion that the Vietnamese war is a tragedy which history has thrust upon the United States of today and which must now be carried to its logical conclusion.

Political leaders tend to be uncomfortable with efforts to put coherent moral limits on their strivings. Former Secretary of State Dean Acheson was recently asked for his own definition of American vital interests. After citing the tautological definition that a vital interest is one without which one cannot live, he went on to declare that our vital interests are "those for which we would fight rather than yield."

Until those responsible for the grave decisions of international politics are disciplined by something less arbitrary than this attitude, the high purposes of American foreign policy will not be served.

other voices

NUCLEAR WEAPONS: SOLUTION OR MORAL BANKRUPTCY?


On April 27, 1957, the deans of six Evangelical faculties of theology of the German Democratic Republic published the following statement:

"We are completely in accord with the synod of the German Evangelical Church and the ecumenical movement in general in rejecting in principle means of massive destruction.

"They profane the gifts of God, human reason and the forces of nature.

"Man is betrayed by them, he whom God created in His image and for whom Christ died and arose from the dead.

"They outrage the goodness of the Creator Himself.

"We are warning against the temptation of allowing them to be used, or like irresponsible persons, to let oneself become indifferent and resigned.

"The world danger, which is not only threatening the present generation, but our children and grandchildren, requires that every one of us try to bring about the outlawing and abolition of these means of annihilation."

The bishops of the churches of the German Democratic Republic adhered to this statement, as did also the heads of the Evangelical churches of the Rhineland, the Palatinate and Hesse-Nassau (in West Germany). The latter summarized their position as follows:

"It is the duty of the Christian message to warn all men that, by taking part in the manufacture and employment of the modern means of destruction, they are profaning the gifts of God, they are blasphemying the goodness of God, and are betraying the image of God."

We are borrowing these statements from the text of a lecture of Mr. Helmut Gollwitzer, professor at the Free University of Berlin, translated with the title: "Christians and Atomic Weapons." The author ends his lecture in this way:

"In case leaders who have not been alerted and inspired by the Church decide to acquire atomic weapons, the Church ought then to speak to the citizen who is called upon to manufacture or use these arms: these are precisely the weapons which make all of the reasons that I gave formerly invalid with respect to conviction and urging the citizen to