

INTERVENTION: THE RESPONSIBILITY OF POWER

Sir Robert G. K. Thompson

I will not here discuss whether it is right or wrong for a country to intervene in the affairs of other states. I will assume that great powers will interfere with small powers and consider, rather, how the great power should exercise its responsibilities.

We must begin by recognizing two major difficulties that face a great power. The first is that many of the problems—in fact most of the problems—which it faces in dealing with small countries are *immune* to power. This applies particularly to a Communist insurgency, which is *designed* to be immune to the application of power. It also applies, of course, to intervention which is perfectly respectable and normal, such as the giving of aid. In the case of aid, many of the problems are impervious to power in its broadest sense, that is, to resources, material, money, and so on. Basically, the solution must come from within the country itself; the small country must be able to generate itself the progress that is required. Outside powers alone cannot possibly do that for them. (I am not here referring, of course, to plain straightforward relief in circumstances of, say, an earthquake or other natural disasters.)

The second difficulty we need to recognize is that, in a Western democracy, it is very difficult in the exercise of power to make immediate decisions and to time the decisions correctly. Decisions are frequently timed to suit the domestic policy of what I would call the supporting power and *not* to fit the situation prevailing in the country where the support is required. I can give you one example of that: the gradual commitment of American combat troops to Vietnam.

In the summer of 1964, which was about eight months before the Marines landed at Danang, it was clear to me that the commitment of American combat troops to Vietnam was absolutely inevitable. At that time there were about 20,000 American advisors in

Vietnam. Even if the worst had happened and the U.S. had decided or been compelled to withdraw, it would have had to commit troops if only to extricate itself. Now the decision to commit combat troops simply could not be taken until the 1964 Presidential election was over. But the situation greatly deteriorated over that period of eight months. I won't say that more forces were needed than would have been necessary in 1964—it is very hard to speculate on that—but certainly in 1965 very large forces were immediately required and even then arrived only just in time to save the situation. This illustrates a difficulty which will always be greater for a democracy than for Communist powers. Democracies inevitably have many additional factors to consider when timing the application of power.

I would like to offer some general rules with regard to the application of power. They are inevitably related, of course, to my experience in Malaya and Vietnam, but I think that they are valid in all cases of intervention, even in cases where the intervention is limited to aid. But they apply rather more to situations where there is military intervention in support of a small power.

The *first* major rule is that the supporting power must have a very precise, clear aim of what it is trying to do and what it intends to do when it intervenes. We have gone through a dreadful period of shifting aims over the last ten years in Vietnam. I can remember hearing back in 1961-62 that "this is a war we Americans cannot afford to lose"—when America wasn't really in the war. This was hastily changed to "giving Diem what he needs to win his own war." We've recently had "to deter aggression" and "to bring Hanoi to the conference table." It is really rather significant that twelve years after America's intervention in Vietnam, Mr. Goldberg devoted at least twenty minutes of a speech to the United Nations to saying what American aims were *not*. This is a very important point. A great power must know *precisely* what it is intending to do.

Most people talk about winning in South Vietnam, and I would like to relate the aim to that. If I were to sit down and write out the precise aim, I would put it something like this: to maintain a free, inde-

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pendent, united South Vietnam which is politically and economically stable and viable. Now whatever the means—whether it is giving aid, assisting South Vietnam, supporting it against an insurgency, and so on up the scale—only if you get that end result is it, in my view, winning. This is continuous from the very start. All policy—even before there may be the possibility of an insurgency—must be kept consistently within this aim.

To give one example of where the aim went straight off the rails in South Vietnam right back in 1955—the U.S. helped maintain a large standing army. This was not entirely an American fault because the Vietnamese did inherit from the Vietminh war a large army. And once you have a large army it is practically impossible to get rid of it. But all American aid to Vietnam in that early period was concentrated on increasing and improving the efficiency of that army. Now the moment you have an army over 150,000 strong in a small country of twelve million people, there is no question where political power lies. The balance within the country of other political forces, or bases that might be, is upset. Political power lies with the army. Whatever one may say about President Diem, one thing he had to do—number one all the time—he had to manipulate the army in order to retain political control.

A large army in such a country has, of course, other unbalancing features: it naturally takes the best of the country, the better educated young men. They go into the army rather than into other government services. And if it's to be an army on the American model—as it was—you need hospitals for the army; you need engineers; you need all sorts of additional services. A country that is very poor in talent is thus required to support two hospitals (and other services), one for the military, one for the civilian, when it cannot adequately support one.

To give another example of the inconsistency of the aim: I remember in 1962 asking an American general how many weapons the Americans had distributed in Vietnam up to that date. And he said to me, "I'm just doing my homework on that subject." (He'd only recently arrived.) A week or two later he told me, "Enough to arm 51 divisions." The figure at the present moment is probably well over the million mark. Supposing the U.S. wins, what would the situation be like within South Vietnam? Not a *hope* of a stable country. The Vietnamese have been fighting among themselves for a thousand years. They now have in the country enough weapons and ammunition to go on fighting among themselves for another thousand years. I use these examples only to show that unless you have a very precise, clear aim and keep

everyone aware of it and directed toward it, things are probably going to go wrong continuously.

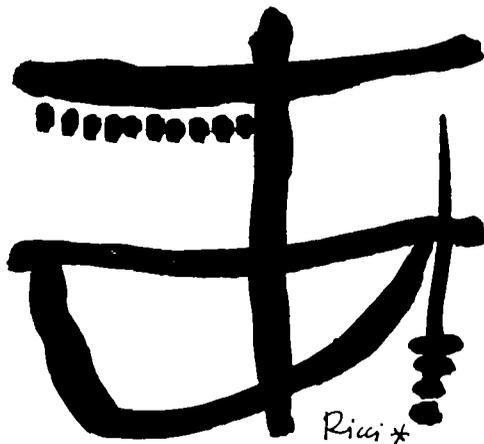
The *second* rule I would like to lay down—and I think this is possibly the most important—applies to the threatened country just as much as to the supporting country: You must maintain your standards and values right throughout the whole campaign. Right from the word go. With regard to the threatened country, it *must* function in accordance with law. It *must* keep to the law itself. You cannot expect its people to obey the law unless the government itself obeys the law. This rule doesn't mean that a government cannot impose tough laws in an insurgency. It can. There is one golden rule about tough laws, however: They must be equally and fairly applied to all, and they *must* work. If people see that tough laws achieve the results that were intended, then they will accept them. But, if the law is not fairly applied, if it is badly applied so that it doesn't work, then the people have every right to resent it and be hostile to it.

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If one keeps to one's standards and values, it puts problems like torture in their proper place: they are crimes. This rule means that you have got to be very careful in what you do. I think that the use of napalm, for example, has caused as much harm to the American cause, certainly in the world at large, as any other weapon. Now I am not against the use of napalm in certain circumstances. If a small body of troops gets caught in an ambush on a jungle road, and this is possibly the sole means of saving them, then use it. But I do not agree that it should be used at all in a populated area. One of the things that must be avoided in an insurgency—it's much deeper than just the use of napalm—is what I would call a "hate campaign." If you create a hate campaign against the enemy, against the Viet Cong, you are really creating conditions where eventual peace becomes impossible. If you're going to win, you have got to live with the consequences. And if those consequences, as the result of a hate campaign or ruthless methods, are such that there is still a large number of people—relatives and friends of Viet Cong—who cannot easily be brought back into the body politic, then it is very difficult indeed to achieve your aim of a stable country. One has to go back to the fundamentals, and really the key words here are "legitimacy" and "reconciliation." One needs to be able to say to the insurgents, "You have been deceived by your leaders. If you'll come back, the government will forgive you." This is a strong line, and unless one recognizes these fundamentals—which are absolutely consistent with our standards and

values—there will be a tendency to do the one thing we *cannot* do, and certainly should never do, and that is to copy Communist methods.

If you do not follow these rules, you get yourself into a situation much like that in which the U.S. now finds itself. The Viet Cong commits the most ghastly atrocities, and that practice ought in itself to be enough to rally everyone to the cause. But this is being obscured by the measures which are being used against the other side. These are now creating a feeling of sympathy for North Vietnam as the underdog.



The *third* rule I will subsume under the term “control.” Who is running this war? One might say “the President.” Well, that’s putting rather a lot on him. I know the buck stops there, but there’s no reason really why the buck should *get* there. He has many, many other things to run. And so, is it Mr. McNamara? Is it Mr. Rusk? Is it Walt Rostow? Is it Mr. Komer? If you work it out, it isn’t, in fact, any of them. And I think you would be very hard put to find out who in Washington is running this war. I’m not posing this question as a novelty. It was posed some time ago by an American who understands all the corridors of power in Washington. And he himself has been quite unable to find the answer.

Now, if you go to Saigon, who is running the war? General Westmoreland? Mr. Ellsworth Bunker? I don’t know. Let us take General Westmoreland. He has the military power. He also has the military responsibility. But in exercising his military power he is bound to produce political results, either good or bad. Has he any responsibility for those? None whatsoever. Who is he commanded by? Can the ambassador give him orders because of the importance of political considerations? The mere *thought* of that would take the roof off the Pentagon! One knows how the Chiefs of Staff would feel on a subject like that. One of the new principles, which is, I think, inflexible in the Pentagon, is the sanctity of the military chain

of command. This idol has only been erected since Marconi invented the radio and, as far as I am concerned, it is designed to ensure that generals win battles even if they lose the war. Military necessity can always be argued to override even the political aims of the war.

Now one starts asking a bit further: Who’s got control over the Vietnamese? They’re fighting this war; supposedly an ally. But there’s no real formal arrangement, no system of joint control. In World War II there was established the Supreme Allied Commands and very elaborate machinery to achieve the close coordination that was needed. Where does that exist in Vietnam?

I offer as an aside the probably apocryphal story about the appointment of General Templer to Malaya. The situation was very serious in 1951. If the British hadn’t got control of it then, Malaya could well have followed the direction Vietnam has taken. The High Commissioner had just been killed in an ambush; the Conservative Government had just come to power in England; and Mr. Lyttleton, who had been a member of the War Cabinet and was the Minister responsible for Malaya, came rushing out to see what needed to be done. When he returned to England, he went to lunch with Churchill at No. 10, the only other person at lunch being Field Marshal Montgomery. They discussed Malaya and shortly after Lyttleton got back to his office he received a note: “Dear Lyttleton. Malaya. We must have a plan. Secondly we must have a man. When we have a plan and a man, we shall succeed. Not otherwise. Yours sincerely, Montgomery, Field Marshal.”

Lyttleton was quite aware of this. The question was who was to be the man. He selected Templer. Now at that particular moment, Churchill was on a visit to the United States and Canada. He insisted that he had to see Templer first, so Templer was flown across the Atlantic to have dinner with Churchill in Ottawa, alone. At the end of the dinner Churchill turned to him and said, “General, to few men in this world is it given to have absolute power. Relish it!”

What did Churchill mean by that? He meant “You have the power. You have the responsibility. And you will have *my* full support.” Templer’s position in those circumstances was that, as High Commissioner and Director of Operations, he was *not* in the military chain of command. He alone gave the orders, and he had the Government’s full support to carry out the job.

With the confrontation between Malaysia and Indonesia, we have had further confirmation of the importance of control. Malaysia was an independent country; Britain was committed by treaty to support her. As a result of that we committed troops right

away, an advantage because it avoided having Malaysia build up forces which might have unbalanced the country. It also meant that military control of the situation was obtained right from the start. Further than that, we absolutely *insisted* that there must be joint control, and a Director of Operations who was a British General was appointed to carry out the operations in Borneo. He was jointly appointed by the Malaysian Government and the British Government and was responsible to a War Council in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, which was composed of a number of Malaysian ministers and two or three British representatives. From that joint council the General got his orders.

In no circumstances were we prepared to have events dictated solely by, say, a Malaysian General, a Malaysian Minister or even the Malaysian Government, considering that we might have become involved in a major war with Indonesia. One *must*, in such circumstances, establish a system which gives one control over events. Moreover, the person who is in control, particularly in the threatened country itself, has got a vast orchestra of instruments which simply have to play in tune—everything from the cymbals of the air force to the flutes of culture. If you allow the cymbals to drown everything else, you'll have a very discordant tune indeed.

The *fourth* rule is a very obvious one. There is really no need to elaborate on it. You must know your enemy. You must know what he is doing, what he is trying to do, and you must get yourself, as it were, onto the right targets. Unfortunately, in complex situations we tend to get distracted by what I would call the "open manifestations" of what is wrong instead of the underlying causes. It is the underlying causes that you have to go for and not the open manifestations.

To bring that down to the insurgency level, it is necessary to go for the insurgent's political, subversive underground organization within the country, *not* the guerrilla units. Chasing guerrilla units can go on forever and ever. If the underground organization is functioning, the guerrilla units will certainly not be reduced; they will probably continue expanding. If the underground organization in the country is providing the recruits, the supplies, and so on, without interruption, then you will not defeat the insurgency.

The *fifth* and final rule about intervention and the responsibility of power is that if you go in you must win. In other words, a responsible power must intervene effectively. This requires a very practical approach and, because all the problems are very difficult, it is going to take time. The mere fact that there is an

insurgency in a country means that there is a lot wrong. One has to accept the fact that winning is going to take a long time. You should, therefore, go for what I would call the "easy areas" first, where you can achieve early successful results. There is an awful tendency to say "What is the most difficult problem? Let's deal with that first." The net result is that you get completely bogged down and, by the time you come back to the easy areas, they themselves are difficult. The important thing from the very beginning is to establish confidence. If you have established confidence from the beginning that you have the determination and the capacity to win, there is some prospect of winning popular support. But you are not going to win popular support if you look like losers.

These are five general rules for a responsible power. I would like only to mention what I call the "deadly enemies of responsibility." The first is ignorance. If I might give an example from Vietnam: One of the most unfortunate things from that conflict has been the shortness of tours of American advisors there, people in command positions. I spent a large period of my time in Saigon—I had many friends amongst American advisors and others in Vietnam—going to cocktail parties to say goodbye to one and hello to his successor. And just as *he* was getting a hold of the problems, you went to a cocktail party to say goodbye to him and to meet *his* successor. One cannot run a war in this way. It leads straight to a situation where people don't know what to do other than to say "more of the same" or "double it." I remember an American friend of mine saying to me way back in 1963, "Doesn't it scare you that in the Pentagon there are now the files of 60,000 officers and men with the words: "Served in Vietnam. Expert in counterinsurgency." It *does* scare me. I can put this quite simply by saying that the lesson of Gideon is the one to be followed.

The second enemy of responsibility is provocation; the awful dangers of an impulsive reaction as the result of provocation. This is designed to cause you to lose the initiative. You are reacting *entirely* to what the other side does. I offer an example from a confrontation between Malaysia and Indonesia. We had British troops there and we had an Air Force available in the area. One night the Indonesians sent over three C-130's and dropped regular parachute troops in Johore. There was a very overt hostile act. How should one react? Take out the Jakarta airfields? Our attitude to it was rather like this: We can handle what they're doing, so why do something that may give us a situation that we cannot handle? It is interesting to specu-

late on what might have happened if we had made a strong military reply. Would regular Indonesian troops have then waded across in large numbers? One might even go on to ask whether Sukarno and the Communist Party might not still be flourishing strongly in Jakarta today, and whether we might all have been involved in a major war in that area.

Everything will be done, particularly by a Communist enemy—this is part of the game—to provoke the wrong reactions. This occurs in really quite small things. They will create incidents in a village where it's uncertain if it's under their control or under your control. They will create incidents to force a reaction that may damage your cause there. One has got to have, therefore, very cool nerves against provocation. One continually hears questions about such incidents at Presidential press conferences, and the general tenor seems to be, when something has happened, "Mr. President, what are you going to do about it?" It is going to be a very great American President who replies, "Nothing!"

The third enemy of responsibility is emotion. American policy towards Asia, many would agree, has to a certain extent been governed by emotion for years. But much closer home: I am scared when I hear a Congressman get up and say, "I will support any action which saves the life of one American boy." This is emotional, *not* rational. It means very frequently that what is done creates situations where you may lose many American boys. One has to recognize that, if one goes into situations like Vietnam, there is a price that has to be paid.

"Impulse" is another enemy. I have mentioned the provoked reaction, but impulse is separate from reaction. I'm very fond of a saying of Tacitus: "All undertakings of ill-considered impulse, though strong

in their beginnings, languish with time." There is an impulsive tendency, when something has gone right, to say: "O.K., let's do that everywhere. And in vast numbers. We've got the power, we've got the resources, so let's do that everywhere"—without really thinking the action through. Why did it work in that particular area? It may have been because of a great number of factors which do not apply to another situation. The point that I would emphasize is that it is very hard to deduce solutions from rules and examples and to say that this is what you should do at any given moment. In Vietnam, one of the great differences between different areas of the country can be considered in terms of time; some of these areas are, as far as the insurgency is concerned, *five years apart*. There are areas under government control as opposed to areas that have been under Viet Cong control for a long time. To say that one particular policy, just because it worked in one case, is therefore at that given moment going to work everywhere, is obvious nonsense. But there's an impulse to say of something that has been successful, "O.K., let's do it everywhere."

This leads on to the fifth and one of the deadliest enemies, and that is impatience. Insurgencies are caused by so many things that it is bound to take a very long time to get satisfactory results. The desire for quick results can be absolutely disastrous. One has to be very calm, thoughtful and calculating about what has to be done in all circumstances where power has to be exercised.

In summary conclusion, the one thing I would stress about the responsibility of power, is that the responsibility for its application and the power itself must be undivided. The person who has the power must have the responsibility.

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