

Comment

Berlin, Cuba and Haiphong

Frederick C. Thayer

President Nixon's decision to mine the harbors of North Vietnam, while stepping up the bombing at the same time, launched another wave of partial hysteria. The president of Amherst College made certain he was arrested for joining a peace demonstration which invaded a nearby military base, a convenient device which enabled him to transfer the problem of campus unrest to a new location. Theodore Sorensen made another of his frequent appearances on the "Op-Ed" page of the *New York Times* to remind us how skillfully John Kennedy, by comparison, had handled foreign policy, especially during the Cuban missile crisis.

It seems to me, however, that the decision to mine the northern harbors may in time produce the same approvable outcomes as two actions taken by the Soviets: the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961 and the emplacement of missiles in Cuba in 1962. In retrospect, those two "aggressive" and "violent" acts stabilized situations which in all probability could not otherwise have been stabilized. In other words, it seems possible that Berlin, Cuba and Haiphong are parallel cases.

Berlin: The Necessary Wall. While many of us remember the sudden erection of the Berlin Wall as a horrible example of how totalitarian states can completely remove from individuals all vestiges of personal "freedom" upon an instant's notice, we seldom recall the larger situation that existed at the time. The Kennedy Administration, despite an extraordinarily narrow victory that might not have withstood an all-out Nixon challenge in some key states, came to office deeply committed to correcting the disastrous errors of another conservative President—Dwight D. Eisenhower. Although the "military-industrial complex" speech is often quoted now, that was not the battle cry of 1961; Kennedy and his cohorts were dedicated to the construction of the complex, for Eisenhower's most grievous sin in their eyes had been his neglect of national defense and his lack of international activism. Recalling to public life Generals Maxwell Taylor and James Gavin, who had resigned in protest when Eisenhower would not give them the funds they sought, the Kennedy Administration launched into an international activism that made John Foster Dulles look like a pacifist.

And while we have been reading for a decade now that Kennedy and his Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, were the first tandem of the modern era

to really "control" the military, it is worth remembering that Kennedy is the only President in quite some time to reward generals for their defiance of an earlier Executive. Of course Taylor did not become Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff until a bit later, but it is still unusual to assign to that post a retired officer who had become a political activist; Taylor was part of Kennedy's 1960 campaign retinue. To understand the significance of his return to government one has to think of possible parallels: Suppose Eisenhower had appointed MacArthur as Secretary of Defense or a victorious Barry Goldwater had put Curtis LeMay back into uniform!

With Kennedy telling us we must be ready to "bear any burden" to accomplish America's global mission, defense budgets skyrocketed and away we went. By the time Kennedy and Khrushchev met in Vienna, the Bay of Pigs was already history and tensions were very high. The Soviets were making their drive to formalize the status of East Germany and we were standing in the way. Not only did we probably scare the daylights out of the Soviets with our precipitous military buildups at home and virtually everywhere else, but our continuous encouragement of exodus from East Germany produced a potential crisis of its own. Had the stream of people leaving East Germany continued at the same rate, or had it increased, it is difficult to reconstruct which might eventually have happened. That it would have led to direct U.S.-USSR confrontation is hardly to be doubted. Thus the instant wall.

There were those in 1961 who regretted the U.S. decision to take no action as the wall was going up. In one of the very few sensible decisions made during the Kennedy years, we did nothing serious enough to offset the effects of the wall. We waxed emotional about it, to be sure, and for many months television producers had the Government's tacit support for financing escape attempts that could be filmed for armchair viewing in America (in a sense, paying some people to kill themselves), but the wall stayed. It appears, in retrospect, that *only* the wall enabled that train of events to be set in motion which we now call the emerging *détente* in Europe. *Only* the wall produced the stability which, however short of perfection, is several million light-years improvement

FREDERICK C. THAYER is a member of the faculty of the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs, University of Pittsburgh.

over 1961. This is the point: *Only* the wall enabled us, the mighty U.S., to stop intensifying the crisis in the two Germanys. In the absence of the wall, our own logic and rhetoric would virtually have compelled us to encourage faster and faster exodus from East Germany and ever increasing instability. Can you imagine a Voice of America broadcast urging people not to leave in droves?

Cuba: The Necessary Missiles. The approved version of the Cuban missile emplacements—first produced virtually to government order by RAND researchers and still echoed by the pompous warlords of the Kennedy years (e.g., Sorensen)—is that the Soviets made an *offensive* move in putting missiles and personnel in Cuba, hoping to gain a “first-strike” advantage thereby. The argument breaks down quickly, of course, because those who use it often do not even understand the jargon of missilery. When the RAND people used the language of “offensive advantage” and “first-strike” they meant that the Soviets were apparently targeting those missiles on missiles of ours and that this would enable them to knock out our missiles should war begin. But anyone who recalls Kennedy’s principal speech will also recall that his emphasis was on the distance of the missiles from specific American cities. Throughout the evolution of strategic thinking about missiles, this has been perceived as *defensive*, or “second-strike,” targeting; that is how the Cuban crisis seems to make the most sense.

One cannot make any sense of the Soviet gamesmanship of 1962 without recalling the 1960 campaign and the Bay of Pigs. In typical electioneering fashion, Kennedy found himself advocating action against Castro; after all, wasn’t Castro merely another result of poor old Ike’s passive foreign policy? True, Nixon argued publicly against action while, behind the scenes, he was advocating the CIA planning then under way. The point is, however, that Kennedy came to office *committed* to action, and he followed through—in part. Furthermore, it is not at all clear that we would have abstained from a second attempt to overthrow Castro; we continued to finance the military training of Cuban refugees, and we were not renowned for our peaceful behavior during those years.

It must have made sense to Castro to ask the Soviets to do something to protect him from another invasion. And it makes just as much sense to view the emplacement of missiles, *from the Soviet perspective*, as a “defensive” act, one designed to discourage an invasion. Whether Khrushchev considered the presence of the missiles themselves or the (thousands of) Soviet technicians the most important factor is difficult to tell. But any invasion force—even without the launching of missiles—would have found itself killing Soviet citizens, thus producing a confrontation with the USSR. Viewed in this light, the Soviet gambit was quite successful: It brought about a U.S.

guarantee to keep Castro in business, his safety no longer a Soviet problem. Again, the point: *Only* the Soviet move enabled the mighty U.S. to stop intensifying a crisis in the Caribbean. Would Kennedy, in the absence of the missile crisis, have publicly renounced his campaign pledge to do something, cutting off military training for the refugees and pledging never again to harm Castro? (An historical footnote: Kennedy, attempting to distinguish between “offensive” and “defensive” weapons, made a strong case for considering the latter always legitimate, thus making it difficult for those who came along later to argue against the development of ABM systems.)

Haiphong: A Necessary Interdiction? This brings us to President Nixon’s current personal crisis, one we will know much more about even before this piece is printed. At the moment (May 13), it appears that the U.S.-USSR summit meeting will come off as planned. If it does, we are likely to see some sort of arms limitation agreement and perhaps a comprehensive economic agreement as well. And if that is the case, the Nixon gambit at shutting off supplies may come to be seen in a different light than the campus marchers currently see it.

Nixon has by now apparently convinced both the Chinese and the Soviets that, from a global perspective, the U.S. is indeed disengaging itself from Indochina. While the withdrawal has been far too slow to appease many critics, it has been an uninterrupted and progressive one. It seems extraordinarily significant that the President explicitly avoided one option available to him, that of landing a few Marines (3,000 perhaps) at Danang to defend that U.S. base against the oncoming North Vietnamese; if we were again to become fully engaged on the ground with the North Vietnamese we might have to stop withdrawing.

What I am suggesting is that, having demonstrated our intention to withdraw, the Nixon gambit *may have made it possible for the Soviets to disengage themselves from the North Vietnamese in an acceptable fashion*. There is reason to believe the Soviets knew Haiphong and other ports would be mined long before Nixon made his public announcement—perhaps as long ago as the Kissinger visit to Moscow. For, shortly after that visit, we reversed our position and reopened talks in Paris for a brief while, presumably at Soviet request. In a sense, the mining appears very close to what might be called a U.S.-USSR agreement on how to disengage from both North and South. *Only* the Nixon gambit may permit the USSR to stop pouring supplies into North Vietnam, for the Soviets logically can advise the North Vietnamese that they are not going to steer Soviet ships into the mines and launch World War III solely for the sake of supporting the North Vietnamese attack.

Let me expand the scenario a bit to test its plausibility. If the North Vietnamese invasion were to continue unchecked for a few more weeks or months, it

is inevitable that it would directly collide with some of the remaining American forces. George McGovern to the contrary, no President (himself included) is likely to permit our troops to flee from pursuing Northern troops. Furthermore, if the North Vietnamese were directly engaged with our troops, they could hardly be expected to stop shooting just to let us board our planes. The Nixon gambit may thus make it possible for the North Vietnamese to avoid direct engagement with us on the ground.

Military people, of course, would have preferred taking action against Haiphong several years ago, and one retired admiral who used to run things in the Pacific, Ulysses Grant Sharp, spoke up immediately in praise of the current move and reminded everyone that he had asked that the same action be taken in 1965. From a narrow military perspective, the Admiral was on the mark, but both he and Nixon's opponents may have missed the essential point: Owing to the presence of extensive U.S. ground forces in South Vietnam from 1965 until well in 1971, action against Haiphong in those years would have been perceived by the rest of the world, and especially the Soviets, as the prelude to an American invasion of North Vietnam; the action of 1972 cannot possibly be seen in the same context as the possibilities of 1965. Assuming that we have established the credibility of our withdrawal—and neither the Moscow meeting nor the one in Peking could have been scheduled otherwise—our action now may be perceived by the Soviets and the Chinese as a part of the withdrawal, not an escalation of the attack. It is obvious that we ourselves cannot attack to the north—another reason for avoiding putting back into South Vietnam even a handful of U.S. Marines.

To be sure, the Soviets and the Chinese immediately issued statements condemning the mining, but we could hardly expect them to praise it. Nor could we expect an American President to announce a tacit understanding with the Soviets on the question, even if there was one. But as this is written, the indications are that while the Soviets and the Chinese may make reasonable attempts to keep the North Vietnamese supplied, they will not undertake direct confrontation on that score—other issues are more significant.

It may be possible, then, to look back upon the Nixon gambit as something which parallels Soviet

actions in Berlin and Cuba, a seemingly aggressive act which permits the parties involved to stabilize a situation that might not otherwise stabilize. This does not imply that the Soviets are guaranteeing the future of the Thieu regime, nor that we are, for that matter. It does suggest that the USSR, which has about as much control over North Vietnamese military decisions as we do over Israel's, regretted the launching of their client's attack and that their acquiescence in the mining may be even more explicit than suggested here.

The Future of Politics. Much of the bombardment now directed at President Nixon is the direct result of the every-four-year charade of electing a President. In this exercise almost any argument seems worth making if it will lead to the only objective that counts—the winning of an election. The system within which we live makes it impossible for the candidates themselves to be completely honest, no matter how moral or ethical they may think their own motivations to be.

I have already indicated that some issues of 1960 were created solely to win the election. All of us still attempt to make sense out of the long-term contradictions traceable to that year. Why is it, for example, that since the Korean War only conservative Presidents have reduced defense budgets? In 1964, anyone who took the time to think seriously about it would have concluded that the war in Vietnam was likely to enlarge, regardless of who won the election. The scenario of the last four years would have been played out in the same way had Humphrey been the victor in 1968.

This year the campaign is likely to be dominated by war and the economy. If my arguments have had any validity, the war is, in effect, already over, and we will be out very soon—regardless of who is President. Both major candidates, whoever they are, will spend the summer and fall telling us how they will expand the economy and increase employment. But, if I may venture a prediction, any President within the first year of the next term will have to take the first steps to *reduce* economic growth. Thus, to use Sheldon Wolin's phrase, the logic of our political process is "systematically deranged," and we cannot long avoid searching for a new one.

In Forthcoming Issues

RONALD STEEL "The 'X' Article 25 Years Later"

ALTON H. QUANBECK & BARRY M. BLECHMAN "The SALT Agreements: Where Do We Go From Here?"

JANET WELT SMITH "Intellectuals & Populism"