

# Fulbright's Circle

Daniel Yergin

Bill Fulbright has suffered for some time from a Cassandra complex," said a senatorial colleague of the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. With reason enough, for Fulbright has spent more than a decade warning of the dangers that come from the arrogance of power. In 1961 he advised John Kennedy against the Bay of Pigs invasion. Throughout 1965 and 1966 he warned Lyndon Johnson not to escalate the Vietnam war—and was rewarded with whispered rumors about his mental balance.

But on one occasion, although Fulbright's advice was good, his prophecy was wrong. One pleasant spring afternoon in 1969 he went to the White House for an amiable two-hour discussion with Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger. He respectfully suggested to the President that the 1968 election had given him a mandate to seek a compromise in Vietnam, withdraw American troops and leave Vietnam's internal problems to the Vietnamese. He cautioned against confusing U.S. interests with those of the Saigon regime and warned against the "siren song" of those American strategists who wanted to turn the last corner—only "to lure the United States into a deeper and more devastating war." And he advised, urged, even pleaded, that the President act before he became a prisoner of events.

Then came the pleasant prophecy. "If you stop the war," he said, "which is what people expect, you can do almost anything else and be re-elected. The people will be that grateful to you."

The President smiled. A Nixon smile. "That's what I'm going to do."

Nixon did not follow Fulbright's advice. He did

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not end the war; indeed, he has made it even more terrible. Yet, like a matinee magician, he gave the appearance of peace, and that was enough to win the people's gratitude in the quirky political year of 1972.

Meanwhile, President-Chairman relations have fallen to just about where they were under Johnson, below freezing. "Except in the line of official duty," said Fulbright with some acidity, "he doesn't see me now."

"America may be coming to the close of a circle," Fulbright recently wrote. Certainly Fulbright has closed his quarter-century circle—from the powerless critic to powerful insider to powerless critic. As chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee he in fact wields only influence, not power; yet despite an almost sure rank among history's greatest senators, his influence is at its lowest ebb. It is evident in his manner. He tires more easily, shows boredom and is more openly irritated.

Indeed, Fulbright is a lonely, isolated figure, respected but not popular in his chamber. Intellectually, he is a Woodrow Wilson, alive and well in a world of cold warriors and would-be Metternichs. Yet—and this is his paradox—long-time observers think that he has never been more creative, that never has he spoken with greater urgency.

Though today Fulbright may sound like a Cassandra, there is also something of the converted sinner about him. The label "dove" is out of date. He has gone through a transformation so thorough that he rejects the entire course of postwar U.S. foreign policy and thus rejects much of his own past. Men do not normally change their ideas in their sixties, but Fulbright now operates on a new set of assumptions, fundamentally different from those which guided him ten years ago.

To fathom the Senator from Arkansas, however, is no easy thing. He is a complicated man, marked by contradictions on every level—a scaring sarcasm and

though foreign policy was too complicated a matter to be left to mere amateurs in the Senate. He saw his job as assisting the professionals in the White House and State Department in carrying out foreign policy." He differed from the prevailing wisdom in details only; he was "more Atlantic than the Atlanticists." De Gaulle was his *bête noir*.

The change began in the aftermath of the Tonkin Gulf affair. At the request of President Johnson in August, 1964, Fulbright—convinced that the Administration was telling the truth about the purported attacks on U.S. ships in the Tonkin Gulf, and angered by what seemed to be North Vietnamese arrogance—skillfully skippered the Tonkin Gulf Resolution to an 88 to 2 victory.

The Administration used that resolution as its mandate to begin the air war over the North; it was, as the Pentagon Papers concluded, "an important threshold in the War."

As he saw the resolution become the permanent justification for an expanding war, and as increasing information pointed to U.S. provocation and fabrication, Fulbright came to regret his role. It became a trauma; his friend Johnson had deceived him, he had been humiliated; he had helped perpetrate a fraud. "For a time," said one senatorial staff member, "he seemed to be confessing every day."

Though the 1965 escalation disturbed him, he tried to influence the President through private memoranda and talks. His arguments were perceptive. In the spring of 1965 he privately warned Johnson not to escalate the war because "an independent Communist regime" would not be incompatible with American interests, because "the commitment of a large American land army would involve us in bloody and interminable conflict in which the advantage would lie with the enemy," and because a "full scale air war" would not defeat the Viet Cong in the South and might lead to intervention by the North Vietnamese army or even by China. The only questionable part of the memo was Fulbright's acceptance, along with most everybody else, that China was an imperialist power intent on expansion. "He used to listen," said Fulbright of Johnson, "but in evaluating my advice against that of his chief advisors, McNamara and Rusk, he decided that they knew the facts."

The open break came over the Dominican Republic in 1965. The Administration claimed that American nationals were endangered, that a Communist uprising was at the core of the civil strife. A careful Foreign Relations Committee study, however, convinced Fulbright that the Administration had used a phony Red Scare to justify both to itself and to the country an unjustifiable intervention. On September 15, 1965, he rose in the Senate: "The Administration acted on the premise that the revolution was controlled by communists—a premise which it failed to establish at the time and has not established since."

"Mr. Johnson never forgave me," said Fulbright. "After that, we never had a private meeting. Never again was I consulted." A pained little smile crossed his face. "Of course, when I look back on it, I wasn't ever really consulted in the sense that he was ever interested in what I had to say. He had made up his mind already. He was trying to keep me within bounds, so I wouldn't take issue and embarrass him. But the September speech was the breaking point."

This event solidified his growing doubts about the whole course of U.S. policy. By the time of the 1966 Vietnam hearings, he was already a dove. Johnson clearly put Fulbright at the top among "Nervous Nellies." In private, the President accused Fulbright of everything from disloyalty to being "unable to park his bicycle straight" to outright racism. "The President used to say that Fulbright has a little old racial problem—he didn't think little yellow people cared as much for freedom as white folks," recalled a former high State Department official.

Fulbright, who never savored the role of congressional crank, was upset by innuendoes in Johnson's Washington that his dissent was a symptom of abnormal psychology—so upset, in fact, that he twice arranged hearings on the interaction of psychology and international politics. "People ridiculed the whole idea," he said, "but they proved to be two of the most interesting series we've ever had. I was very interested myself, because I've often wondered why I take a different view from others."

"It's not for me to be a Freud," he added, but he did trace his current role back to his family and childhood. "There was nothing in my background to give me the same kind of egotism—I'm not sure that's the right word, it may be offensive—as Lyndon Johnson." He emphasized the importance of his father's death when he was eighteen. "He left six children and my poor mother. We thought we were going to the poorhouse. I was young, and we were distracted, and I learned humility—if you want to call it that. I wasn't prepared to be pushing people around. I was trying to survive."

But his family was well-to-do, some said the third richest in Arkansas, and many things came to him easily and gracefully. He was an All-American football player (never forgotten on election day), a Rhodes Scholar and president of the University of Arkansas at an absurdly young age.

This background has made Fulbright independent—intellectually, financially, emotionally—all his life. "The combination of all these types of things," he said, "gives you a different attitude, a different approach under certain circumstances. I would react differently from Johnson—and Nixon. It was much more difficult for Mr. Johnson to accept what he would interpret as a defeat than for me. It's the background against which you make judgments, without being conscious of it."

He reflected for a moment. "I remember a curious experience." He described a White House meeting in February, 1965, when the decision to escalate the bombing was taken. Only Senator Mike Mansfield and he took issue. "I didn't have any particular reason for dissenting, for disagreeing. I had no intelligence reports." He said that with a certain disdain. "It just seemed the wrong thing to do. It was purely instinctive."

He now talks of Lyndon Johnson with the nostalgia one reserves for a hopelessly wayward friend. He thinks Johnson might well have stopped the war with a conference. "He probably would have been much more generous if only they had saved his face and not made it appear he had been defeated. I don't think he had quite the sensitivity that this present President has about *winning* the game. He had more assurance, personally, than this President. But the Vietnamese had suffered much, had been so disappointed over Geneva, that they were just as arbitrary as they could be. And that was a great mistake from their own point of view, for they could have had this war over a long time ago."

Fulbright is steadfast in his opposition to present Administration policies. He has concluded that they want to maintain a preeminent American presence in Southeast Asia. "I don't think the people knew in 1968 or know now what is in the mind of the President—and it's not a policy of disengagement. Vietnamization means control by proxy. The President may be psychologically unable to make a compromise, which is what negotiations are all about."

"There's still the underlying feeling that it is our responsibility to build up what they call a 'structure for peace'—not unlike what Rusk used to talk about. There's a considerable continuity between administrations, but they're still not willing to face up to the fact that it is beyond our capacity to do this unilaterally. They're not even willing to discuss a role for the U.N."

What alternative does the Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee propose? "If you were George McGovern's Secretary of State," he was asked, "or, perhaps better, National Security Advisor, how different would your foreign policy look?"

"President," he replied sternly, as though correcting an elementary mistake in a junior seminar. "It's the President's doing."

"President, then."

"To begin with, this assumption that our country play the role it has assumed is impractical. It's beyond our physical and political capabilities. We're not up to that sort of thing. No country is."

The first step would be an end to the Vietnam war, ended the way the French ended their war—with a conference. We would accept a mixed government, including Communists, and we would not attempt to maintain a major U.S. position in Southeast Asia.

Fulbright would shift away from what he describes as America's "great power militarism." This would involve both the rejection of military responses to political problems and a substantial reduction in U.S. bases and commitments abroad. He would also avoid new commitments like those the Administration is now negotiating with the Portuguese and Greek dictatorships for bases in Athens and the Azores. He would revert to a policy of nonintervention. No more military and CIA involvements as occurred in Greece and the Dominican Republic. No more public funds for private organizations like Radio Free Europe. No longer a free hand to the Pentagon propagandist within our own country.

He would continue to pursue the *détente* with Russia and China, looking for areas of common interest and possible cooperation. (Fulbright has applauded the President's efforts in these directions. After the China trip, he wrote Nixon, congratulating him and pledging his full support. No reply came from the President.) As many major international questions as possible, including the Middle East, would be moved inside a revived U.N. And foreign aid would be redirected from military assistance toward developmental projects.

Finally, he would attempt two crucial changes in



foreign policy practices. First, believing that the "cult of the strong Presidency" has created a crisis-oriented presidential dictatorship in foreign policy, he would try to restore Congress's constitutional role in declaring war, making treaties and advising the President. "The American Congress is indeed a slow-moving and sometimes inefficient body," he observed last year, "but to those of us who have developed an appreciation of the capacity of people in high places for doing stupid things, there is much to be said for institutional processes which compel people to think things over before plunging into action."

Secondly, in what is a dramatic reversal for a country that has known a quarter century of permanent crisis, he would deescalate the importance of foreign policy itself. Too much emphasis—often in retrospect a kind of hysterical emphasis—has taken our eyes away from the urgent problems at home—and has diverted the time and money they need. "I would guess," Fulbright said, "that fully 80 per cent of the President's working hours are concerned with the war in one way or another. Someone might prepare a speech for him on social problems, and he gives it, but that's all."

As surely as Johnson meant Fulbright when he attacked the "Nervous Nellies," so President Nixon obviously had him in mind when he criticized those "former internationalists" who have become "neoisolationists." Fulbright is obviously sensitive on that score and reacted with exasperation. "My enemies call all this isolation. I call it nonintervention. Call it anything you like. But we should cut out many of these commitments—all too many of them wasteful and unnecessary and dangerous. But this does not mean we withdraw from the world."

Obviously Fulbright is not an isolationist. But he is also not an internationalist in the interventionist school of the Deans (Acheson and Rusk) or in the managerial school of the Princes (Metternich and Bismarck). He is in many respects a very traditional Wilsonian—"classic" as he puts it—at a time when "neo-balance of power" has become the new orthodoxy.

Kissinger is the only member of the Administration with whom relations have not soured: indeed, they lunch together occasionally. (Even after Nixon resumed the bombing of Hanoi in December, a "subdued" Kissinger made a trip to the Senate to lunch with Fulbright.) And they share certain common ideas, particularly that the "two camps" division of the cold war is over and that Russia and China are in many ways conservative states with which we can pursue "businesslike relations."

Yet they differ in fundamental premises. Kissinger's balance of power assumes that struggle and war are the natural order on the world scene. Every tiny quake in the Third World threatens American security and only the artful management by the likes of

Henry Kissinger can prevent collapse into war. In contrast to this pessimistic world outlook, Fulbright assumes that peace can be as natural a state as war. He is suspicious of the crisis managers and questions the entire validity of the international "game of nations." Perhaps touched by utopianism, he believes that, as he said last year, the U.N. has been the "one great new idea in the field of international relations." Unlike Kissinger, he regards change and revolution as inevitable but does not believe that all change threatens us.

Moreover, Fulbright makes a number of pointed criticisms of a balance-of-power system—great powers becoming captives of their smaller allies, the tremendous restraints imposed by nuclear weapons, that balance of power systems tend to break down as Kissinger's vaunted Vienna system collapsed in August, 1914.

While others have made many of these specific points, Fulbright's program, in its entirety, has a coherence. In effect, he has articulated what is today's "opposition line" more clearly than anybody else. His influence is clearly felt today, however, only in Congress's efforts to get back its role in policy-making. "Nobody has had more impact than he," said Stuart Symington. "A lot of people prattle on the floor about the dignity of the Senate, but he's the one who's worked really hard to preserve the prerogative of the Senate. The Senate's new look is embodied in how he handles it. If he should not come back to the Senate after the 1974 elections, it would be a disaster for the country."

Not everybody bends to Fulbright's leadership. He has been criticized lately for tactics. Moreover, a dozen or so senators can be expected to vote immediately against any legislation or resolution bearing his name. And a lot of congressmen simply resent him. Last year, Representative Thomas Morgan, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, was asked what had happened in a conference meeting between his committee and the Foreign Relations Committee. "Nothing happened," Morgan snapped, "except that Professor Fulbright lectured us for an hour."

The turnabout in congressional attitude on its role can be dated to August 17, 1967, when Under Secretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach told a Foreign Relations Committee hearing that, in the context of the Vietnam war, "the expression of declaring war is one that has become outmoded in the international arena." Katzenbach was thus saying that the presidential prerogative on major questions was virtually complete. In the years since, the Senate, sometimes a majority, but more often a substantial but growing minority, has sought to regain its role. This new kind of bipartisanship has taken many forms—from the anti-ABM coalition, to stop-the-war amendments, to efforts to force the President to reveal all secret executive agreements.

But as the Haiphong mining last spring and more recent escalations of the air war prove, Congress's role in foreign policy is more brave talk than actual fact. It was made clear in a caucus during a crisis moment last year when a senator who had called for an "audience" with the President had to be sharply reminded by Mike Mansfield: "Not an audience, but a meeting. He's not king—yet."

"We've been trying everything we can think of," said Fulbright, "but we've been thwarted. One of the main reasons for the inability of Congress to re-assume its proper role is the existence of the war." His secretary buzzed him. He would have to go to the floor shortly to vote on a war fund cutoff—a vote in which the Administration would once again scrape through. But he continued: "When you have a Congress and a country dominated by this war fever, the feeling that our men are on the front lines—" He shook his head. "It's an atmosphere almost impossible to overcome."

"It's true, as societies become more complex, there's a natural tendency toward the concentration of power in the executive. And an economic crisis or a war always leads to an exaggeration of executive power. We've been in a forty-year crisis. This is the fundamental reason for the deterioration of Congress. There's nothing you can do until you can get over the feeling that there is impending disaster, and you've got to look to the great leader."

Yet Fulbright has been doing something. He and Eugene McCarthy made dissent respectable. Beyond that, Fulbright was the first to begin—at first tentatively a decade ago, then with increasing confidence—to suggest the outlines and orientations for a new

U.S. foreign policy. He began this effort long before the old orthodoxy had collapsed, at a time when Henry Kissinger was still engrossed in the nuclear doombooks of the cold war.

So he may be less the outcast, the Cassandra, and more the teacher than he recognizes. He is as much the foreign policy professor as Kissinger. For this new Nixon-Kissinger line—in its better moments, stripped of its geopolitical jargon and Spenglerian gloom, separated from its powerful anti-Communist remnants—shows remarkable congruity with the Fulbright outline. It turns out that they too have been listening, at least some of the time. It's just that they prefer to forget where they heard it first.

The conversation, as it ended, returned to the Vietnam war. Fulbright always returns to the war; it is an obsession, but one grounded in our recent history. For him the war is both a sign and a cause of our misfortunes. It has crippled our foreign policy, drained resources, eroded the national life and destroyed the credibility of government.

His secretary had buzzed him again and the bells for a vote were ringing as he walked from his office into the hallway of the New Senate Office Building. He was asked how effective he has been. He was standing now by the special elevator for senators that would take him to the basement, where he would catch a train that would carry him to the Capitol. The Senate page held the door open. Fulbright shrugged, as though weary at the end of a long, frustrating day. "I haven't been effective at all, have I? The war's still going on." He said it matter-of-factly, almost coldly. Perhaps there was in his voice a note of sadness as well.