

By Richard Starnes

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U.S. Brinkmanship in Viet Fails to Gain Support



LYNDON JOHNSON, who is more dedicated to government by consensus than any President since Warren Harding, has fallen short of generating wide public support for his policy in Viet Nam.

Indeed, administration brinkmanship in Southeast Asia finds more favor among Republicans than it does among the President's own party. A Gallup Poll taken before the President made his Johns Hopkins speech found that 41 percent of Americans favored peace negotiations, 42 percent favored sending more troops and planes, and 17 percent expressed no opinion.

But when replies were broken down by party affiliation they showed that most of the Democrats who held an opinion favored peace talks. Of Democrats polled, 43 percent backed negotiations, 40 percent favored increased armed intervention, and 17 percent were undecided. Republicans showed 45 percent in favor of greater troop commitment, only 38 percent in favor of negotiations, and 17 percent undecided.

Abroad, of course, American policy in Southeast Asia is almost universally mistrusted. An extraordinary Japanese mission to Viet Nam, Cambodia and Laos conducted by Shunichi Matsumoto, a respected diplomat and former envoy to Britain, concluded that it was doubtful the United States could prevail in Viet Nam by force of arms.

Matsumoto questioned the basic American assumption that the Viet Cong was the creature of North Viet Nam and Communist China, or even that it was largely Communist in character.

"Even the people of Saigon," he reported, calculate Communist strength in the Viet Cong is "at the most, 30 percent."

The Japanese diplomat, who is an influential adviser to the staunchly pro-American government in Tokyo, went so far as to suggest the Viet Cong guerrilla forces "could possibly be called a movement somewhat similar to the resistance of the French underground during World War II.

"It can be said that the Viet Cong is not directly connected to Communist China or the Soviet Union.

"Consequently it is not certain that the Viet Cong will give up fighting because of the bombing of North Viet Nam."

This same opinion is shared by many of the people who took the trouble to study the U.S. State Department's "White Paper" on Viet Nam. The document purported to show that the civil war in South Viet Nam was sponsored, directed, equipped and manned largely from North Viet Nam. But scrutiny of the White Paper revealed that it demonstrated the reverse of what it undertook to show. Documented instances of help from North Viet Nam to the guerrillas in the South just could not be reconciled with the magnitude of the Viet Cong war effort.

The inescapable truth is that the war in South Viet Nam is largely a self-supporting civil war that is being supplied almost wholly by captured U.S. weapons.

This leads to the vital question of what would happen even should Hanoi succumb to the pressure bombing and withdraw support from the Viet Cong. If, as Matsumoto and others have concluded, the guerrilla war contains large elements of indigenous Nationalism, it is at least possible that the Viet Cong will continue to fight.

If that happens it will leave President Johnson beset by a dilemma even more cruel than the one that faced him when his advisers from the Department of Defense and the Central Intelligence Agency reluctantly informed him that the pretense of organized resistance from Saigon was not long for this world, and that other harsh alternatives had to be considered.

Like all Presidents, Mr. Johnson is concerned with the ultimate judgment which history will pass on him and his administration. Further miscalculation in Southeast Asia could lead it to the grim conclusion that the first shot of World War III was the one that killed John F. Kennedy in Dallas.

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