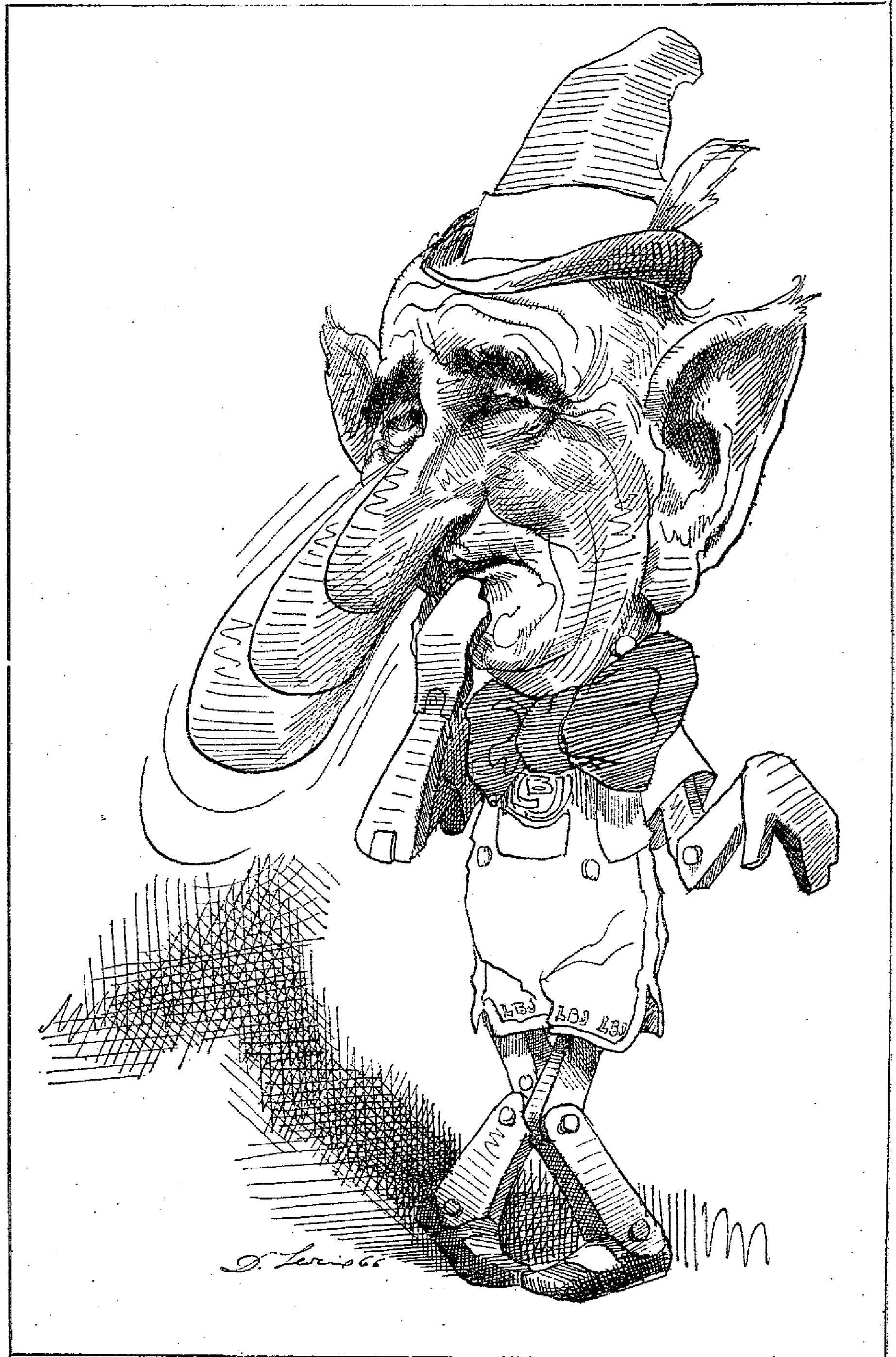
A Visit to Washington

Ronald Steel

Two years away, and Washington seems strangely metamorphized, like a cocoon that instead of giving birth to a butterfly has, in one's absence, produced a frog. In the fall of 1964 it seemed likely that the promises of Kennedy could be redeemed by the energies of Johnson, that the neglected nation might still become a Great Society, and the accidental involvement in Southeast Asia could be quietly liquidated with a vague diplomatic agreement and a few well-chosen words. The long-awaited and long-neglected reform of the American society seemed finally at hand. The interventionist style of the Kennedy administration appeared tempered by the quiet pragmatism of its successor. There was a feeling of renewal and expectation: a belief that although much was difficult, nothing was quite impossible. Washington was on the verge of recognizing that if it had no answers for the world, it at least knew what to do for itself.

That optimism has faded. The quest for "excellence" at home has been subsumed by the pursuit of grandeur abroad. The re-building of our cities, the reform of an outdated social structure, the re-cementing of a fractured society—these urgent national needs have once again been pushed into second place by the demands of an ideological war. Perhaps this was inevitable. Perhaps this war, and the methods used to wage it, were pushed upon us by an uncooperative foe and the demands of an implacable destiny. Perhaps America's role, as Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia said a few weeks ago, is to "spread war and ruin everywhere"—in the name of a higher moral order. If so, we have little choice but to live with the consequences of this role—until we should choose another one for ourselves.

But this was not the role America seemed ready to embark upon only two years ago. Then Lyndon Johnson, the voice of compassion and restraint, was blasting the folly of a Presidential candidate who sought to win the war in Vietnam by bombing the North and napalming the South. What provocation, what madness, what futility. One could hardly take the Goldwater proposals seriously—until they were adopted a few months after the election by the President himself. Maybe this, too, was inevitable. But a visitor who has been away from the capitol and from the country, between the Presidential campaign of 1964 and the mid-term elections of 1966, cannot help but feel that something rather strange has happened in the interval.



What has happened, of course, is that a minor skirmish in Vietnam involving a few thousand American advisers has turned into a major American war which has preoccupied the administration and is draining energies that might otherwise be employed elsewhere. Washington is a city obsessed by Vietnam. It eats, sleeps, and particularly drinks this war. There is virtually no other subject of conversation worthy of the name, and no social gathering or private discussion that does not in-

evitably gravitate toward the war. Never, one feels, has a war been so passionately discussed, so minutely examined, so feverishly followed—and so little understood—as the war in Vietnam. People who can rattle off the number of infiltrators who cross the border every week, or the names of village chieftains and Buddhist priests, do not seem to have any clear idea of how we got into this war, or exactly what it is we hope to accomplish.

Constituent assembly—50 million tons—Thich Tri Quang—Can Ramh Bay. This is the face of Vietnam as reflected through the mirror of Washington. A dazzling interplay of names and numbers, of departed politicians and aspiring generals, of anonymous enemies killed and unknown villages "reclaimed," of napalm dropped and harbors built, of bridges destroyed and battalions infiltrating through the jungle. Anonymous enemies indistinguishable, at a bomber's height of 30,000 feet, from our anonymous friends. Anonymous concepts like "voting," "democracy," and "self-determination" which take on—in the metallic offices of the government bureaucracy or in the Danish modern sophistication of a Washington cocktail party—an abstract quality. Vietnam, one feels, has become not so much a place as a way of thinking. "What happens in South Vietnam," an administration official told me rather portentously, "will determine the fate of Asia for the rest of this century. With stakes like that, we can't afford to back out."

A skeptic might be more receptive to the arguments in favor of this war if they were presented with less passion and more reason, if it were possible to feel that beneath the morass of figures and platitudes the administration had a really clear grasp of issues—that it knew exactly where it was going and why it had taken this particular path to get there. But it has not had the time, or the aptitude, or perhaps the understanding to explain this war in terms that could reconcile it with traditional American values. As a result, it has lost the support of much of the nation's intellectual community. This has bred the crisis of confidence that has been the undoing of governments in other democratic countries and which may yet threaten this one. Anyone who was in France during the long agony of the Algerian war would not be totally out of place in today's Washington. He would find the same impassioned commitment by government officials, the same promise that the fighting was in its "last quarter hour," the same baffled acquiescence by the population, the same revolt of the intellectuals, and the same gradual erosion of confidence by the people in their government. Maybe "it can't happen here"; but it has happened in too many other places for anyone to be sure.

This sense of isolation on the part of the high officials of the administration leads to a good deal of testiness and unwillingness to engage their critics in serious discussion. In the best of times governments do not tolerate criticism easily, but this is an administration which has come to equate dissent with ignorance, or even worse, disloyalty. This is a city of closed minds, where the lines are so tightly drawn that neither side is willing to give the benefit of the doubt, or even at times a modicum of courtesy, to its opponents. There is little about this war that merits sanctimony, but this seems to have become the only emotion left to those who equate opposition with ignorance or evil. Even such favorites of the intellectual Establishment as Walter Lippmann and Senator Fulbright find themselves isolated and reviled by the administration—their arguments automatically discounted for no other reason than that they are in conflict with the current line. "Those people," a State Department official told me, "don't understand what this war is all about. So why should we pay any attention to them?"

MAYBE THE ADMINISTRATION is right and all its critics are wrong. Maybe Ho Chi Minh is a new Hitler and the fate of Asia will be determined by what regime rules Saigon. But the argument has tended to be more abusive than enlightening, more concerned with magic formulas and high-sounding phrases than with convincing analyses of what the alternatives really are. The administration would clearly like to extricate itself from a war which is bringing no credit to itself or to the country. Yet it is not willing to accept a settlement which would allow the Vietcong to play a major role in a neutral government. This, in its eyes, would constitute a victory for Peking's doctrine of "wars of national liberation" and would thereby provide the signal for similar guerrilla actions throughout the underdeveloped world.

Vietnam is not so much important for itself as for what it symbolizes. With the stakes so high, the administration believes that it has no choice but to fight this war through to the end. Hopefully, the end would be a negotiated settlement in which the North, in Dean Rusk's memorable phrase, would "stop doing what it knows it's doing," and abandon the Vietcong.

This is the official rhetoric of the administration: a negotiated truce. But in Washington the talk centers more on "victory" than on negotiations, and the administration seems increasingly committed to the belief that the war in Vietnam can be "won" without any concessions to the Vietcong or any formal agreement with the North. "This war can be won on the battlefield," an administration official told me, "and with half a million American troops we don't have to accept any compromise settlement with Ho Chi Minh." Despite the mounting figures of American casualties and South Vietnamese army desertions, the talk in Washington is of victory—without the help of the South Vietnamese if necessary, and without a war with China.

Deeply committed to this war which preoccupies so much of its energies, the administration has not only been exceedingly impatient with its critics, but has shown a disturbing tendency to use its vast powers over public information to convey an impression favorable to its own interpretation of events. "Managed news" first became an issue during the Bay of Pigs landings, when an embarrassed Kennedy administration tried to put a favorable face upon a fiasco. But this administration, involved in something far more serious than a bout with Castro, has shown an even greater willingness to manipulate the news for its own purposes. Some suppression of the news is inevitable during a war, and no government can be expected to tell the whole truth where military security is concerned.

What is troubling about the Johnson administration is not that it keeps military secrets from the press, but that the information it gives out is often erroneous and deliberately meant to deceive. In Vietnam the Pentagon's information policy has been under persistent attack by journalists, and there is now a growing belief that the Tonkin Gulf incident—which the President used to obtain a blank check from Congress for waging the war—was, if not entirely fabricated, almost certainly provoked by the US government. Whatever the merits of the war, this is not a policy which can be shrugged off lightly, for it is central to the whole concept of government by consent. An administration which deliberately manipulates the press and the Congress thereby manipulates the people as well. Whatever this may be, it is not democracy as it is understood by Americans.

Nor is this policy one which is confined to the Pentagon and to military operations. It has now, apparently, been taken over by the State Department and applied to such theoretically academic matters as diplomatic history. Recently a *New York Times* reporter, as a result of some private sleuthing, discovered that the State Department's White Paper on Franco-American relations—and particularly the exchange of memos between De Gaulle, Eisenhower, and Kennedy on the question of France's request for greater European participation in NATO decision-making—had deliberately omitted key documents in an effort to bolster the US position. Even the archives, it seems, are not safe from news management on the part of an administration overly zealous to prove that it can never be wrong.

Just as Vietnam dominates official, and even unofficial, Washington, so it also dominates any reporting about Washington. This is inevitable, and it is also unfortunate, for it drains away energies that are desperately needed for other, and even more pressing matters. "Were it not for this Vietnam thing," one of the nation's most outspoken journalists said to me, "I'd be able to write about the real crises—about poverty and civil rights and the cities. But as it is I have to—we all have to—write about the war, while everything else collapses around us."

A RETURNING VISITOR to Washington might not, at first glance, feel that everything else was collapsing. During the past two years this rather patchy, cozy, provincial town has acquired a patina of progress—as we define that abused term. The obligatory Hilton has finally been finished, some handsome new buildings have sprung up along Connecticut Avenue, two quite splendid

round structures have erupted in the neo-Roman shadow of the State Department, and the Southwest development project offers an impressive example of the possibilities of urban renewal.

But progress in Washington, like anywhere else, is not measured in tons of concrete poured. While flashy new buildings have gone up for affluent labor unions, giant corporations, and the upper-middle-class federal elite, hundreds of private dwellings have been torn down and thousands of people displaced—most of them the silent poor. The charming row houses of Foggy Bottom have disappeared almost overnight, to be replaced by the ugly scar of a super-highway which speeds commuters out to the dormitory suburbs of Virginia every night at five. The Washington public school system, at the mercy of a Congressional committee dominated by white Southerners, has virtually broken down, and the students, 90 per cent of whom are Negroes, receive an education which enables them to aspire to the level of gas-station attendant or elevator operator.

In this first American city to have a Negro majority, the problems of the American metropolis can be seen in classic form: a core city of office buildings and department stores, a white enclave of fashionable town houses and high-rise apartments, a mushrooming suburban ring for middle-class white families, and a continually expanding slum area of Negroes alienated from white society and increasingly hostile to a system which keeps them perpetually on the bottom.

This is the other Washington, the Washington that the tourist rarely notices but that every American is coming to see reflected in his own city. This is urban America, where elegant office buildings and apartment houses conceal the breakdown of public services, where expressways speed commuters away from the city problems they help create, where overcrowded and understaffed schools are unable to educate young Americans for the jobs demanded in tomorrow's world, where social disintegration has become the handmaiden of material progress, and where whites and Negroes face each other sullenly over a widening chasm of misunderstanding and fear. Two years ago it was possible to dismiss much of this as growing pains, to believe that the ideals of the Great Society and enormous infusions of federal funds could heal the scars in American life.

Today it is difficult to be so optimistic. A society grown powerful in the belief that all problems are solvable, that such phenomena as defeat and tragedy need never touch this nation, is now finding its assumptions challenged and its institutions put to a terrible test. "I'm not so much worried about Vietnam," a distinguished Senator confessed to me, "as I am about America. I wonder what's going to happen to us if we can't even achieve at home some of the ideals we're trying to pursue abroad." Such fears are beginning to trouble many people in Washington, nettling the brain like the jets that now whine over affluent Georgetown and clouding over the heroic rhetoric of the war with nagging questions about the viability of the American society. The mantle of imperial Rome, while it has intrigued some people in the suburbs of the White House, still rides uneasily on the shoulders of today's Washington. □