

The inevitable questions



Ho Chi Minh



Fidel Castro

LOS ANGELES: A stint on the lecture circuit is useful in several ways to a political writer. There is the money, which is always useful. There is the delightful sound of the uninterrupted human voice uttered by oneself, a sound heard in Washington these days only by President Johnson. There is also the useful discovery that what interests Washington does not necessarily interest the rest of the country, and vice versa.

For example, nobody in these parts cares about the balance-of-payments problem. They ought to, but they don't. On the foreign front, what people care about is Cuba and Vietnam. And at least here on the West Coast, most people seem to be a lot more belligerent than their Government about Cuba, and a lot less so about Vietnam.

In the question period after a lecture, a lecturer soon comes to recognize the Inevitable Question. In 1961, for example, the Inevitable Question was, "What do you think about the Peace Corps?" Last year it was, "How about managed news in Washington?" This year there are two Inevitable Questions: "Why don't we go into Cuba and get rid of Castro?" and "What's wrong with neutralizing Vietnam?"

The first question is inspired by Sen. Barry Goldwater, who says that we should be "in Cuba tomorrow." The Goldwater line has had a lot more impact in the hinterlands than Washington officialdom realizes.

The second question is inspired by General de Gaulle, with an assist from senators Mike Mansfield, Wayne Morse and Ernest Gruening. There is no "answer" to either question, of course. But there are certain facts which seem to be imperfectly understood by most people, and certain official assessments based on those facts. As regards Cuba, the facts and the assessment run about as follows:

Fact One. Castro is now so firmly entrenched that it is fatuous to suppose that "refugees and mercenaries," as Senator Goldwater suggests, could bring him down.

Fact Two. To rid Cuba of Castro, American troops would have to be used—and in large numbers. Russians aside, Castro has under arms about 300,000 regulars and militiamen. Certain of Castro's Russian and Czech weapons, like the superheavy Czech multiple machine gun and the Stalin II tank, are accounted superior to comparable American weapons. This country could quickly establish control of the air over Cuba, but the best estimates are that an invasion of Cuba would require a ground force of six divisions, of about 14,000 men each, plus supporting troops. Some estimates run higher. There are 16 ready U.S. Army divisions and three Marine divisions. Most of these forces are committed in Europe or elsewhere. Thus to take and hold Cuba would require all, perhaps more than all, of our ready reserves of infantry. And of course quite a lot of American soldiers would be killed.

Fact Three: Given its geographic situation, Guantánamo is indefensible. The corporal's guard of

Marines there could not possibly hold the base in case of war with Cuba.

Fact Four: An American invasion of Cuba would be bitterly opposed by all our allies.

Fact Five. Khrushchev has repeatedly threatened that "the rockets will fly" if Cuba is attacked. The policy makers believe that this threat must be taken seriously, at least on a contingency basis.

The assessment based on these facts is simple. To use American force to bring Castro down would be an act of folly, short of some overt aggression by Castro himself, or a second attempt by Khrushchev to place nuclear-capable missiles on Cuban soil. The assessment may be wrong—Castro is a very real threat to American interests in this hemisphere. But given the further fact that all recent indications suggest that Castro's power in Latin America is waning, the assessment is at least entirely rational.

Many of the same people who want to be "in Cuba tomorrow" want to be out of Vietnam tomorrow. The answer to their Inevitable Question—"What's wrong with neutralizing Vietnam?"—is that there is nothing wrong with it, except that it cannot be done. Or it can only be done at the price of ensuring Communist domination of Southeast Asia.

De Gaulle talks about neutralizing "Indochina," which presumably includes Communist North Vietnam. It is just plain silly to suppose that North Vietnam's Communist dictator Ho Chi Minh, who has been a passionate doctrinaire Communist since he began to grow his straggly beard, is suddenly going to become genuinely "neutral" between the Communist and non-Communist worlds.

In fact, those who favor "neutralizing" Vietnam do not seriously suppose that this is going to happen. What they do suppose is that some sort of face-saving formula can be devised which will permit American power to be withdrawn from South Vietnam. No responsible official this reporter has been able to discover has any doubt of what would happen then.

Ho Chi Minh's Communist guerrilla movement, the Viet Cong, which sorely threatens the American-supported Saigon government, would control South Vietnam within a matter of days. Not long thereafter the shaky non-Communist governments of Southeast Asia would all be replaced by Communist or pro-Communist regimes.

Finally, after the United States had handed over its anti-Communist supporters in Vietnam to the Communist firing squads, despite solemn assurances from three Presidents in a row, the word of the American Government would be worthless, in Asia and elsewhere. This is why Secretary of State Dean Rusk has said that de Gaulle's neutralization is a "formula for surrender." It is why the American Government may decide to expand the war to the north, at very great risk, if that is the only alternative to Communist victory in Vietnam.

The decision not to "go into Cuba and get rid of Castro" and the decision not to "neutralize Vietnam" are both entirely sensible decisions. But to judge from those Inevitable Questions, the American Government has utterly failed to convince the American people that it is sensible to intervene in Vietnam, half a world away, and not to intervene in Cuba, 90 miles from our shores. To explain the paradox is no easy task, but it is a task that badly needs doing.

Stewart Alsop

4/11/64
SE Pat