

Today and Tomorrow .. By Walter Lippmann

Prudence and Mobility *Part 8/11/64*

THERE IS serious fighting in three widely separated places—in Southeast Asia, in Cyprus, and in the



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Congo — and in different degrees we are much involved in all of them. Our armed forces are directly involved in Southeast Asia. In Cyprus our diplomacy is deeply involved. In the Congo we are much concerned though, fortunately, we are not now involved at first hand.

The common factor in all three situations is that they are the aftermath of the breakdown of the old imperial systems—the French system in Indo-China, the British system in the eastern Mediterranean, and the Belgian system in central Africa. Without even intending it, indeed while wishing it had not happened, the United States has been sucked into all three situations.

The end of the empires has left a vacuum of power which the liberated peoples have not yet mustered the strength or found the political maturity to fill without foreign aid. The cold war is in large part a conflict about whether the vacuum shall be filled by Moscow or Peking or Washington.

THERE IS no certainty that there will not be other theaters of disorder in

Asia, Africa, and the Americas. Indeed, the chances are that there will be others. Wherever and whenever a new theater of disorder appears, whenever there is a new revolutionary civil war, there will be a powerful suction pulling the United States to intervention and there will be powerful pressures here at home to push us to intervention.

As the United States comes near to having a monopoly of the disposable military power in the Western world, we cannot afford to become totally engaged in any one theater or to commit all our reserves in one place. For that reason our intervention, when it cannot be avoided, must be limited, measured, and always directed to a political solution rather than to a military victory and unconditional surrender.

THUS, it is a vital American interest to safeguard its strategic mobility. We could lose our mobility if we became hugely committed in one theater, and let ourselves become engaged in a total war, say on a long land frontier in South Asia. If ever, even for the noblest ideological reasons, we let ourselves be entrapped in such a war, our position in the world as protector of the interests of the West would be gravely shaken. We are very powerful. But we are not so powerful that we can commit all our reserves. The role which we have to play in this period of his-

tory cannot be sustained if we do not use a shrewd and prudent diplomacy to economize the use of military force.

In applying these principles to Southeast Asia we have to remember that the only great military force China possesses is her enormous army, and that in a serious conflict she would be bound to use it by attacking adjacent countries which we have promised to defend. It would be wishful thinking to suppose that China, though it can be hurt fearfully, is entirely helpless. And here at home we must not therefore ask American soldiers to fight an impossible war. We must make our readiness to negotiate an accommodation as credible as we make our readiness to retaliate against aggression.

EVERYONE realizes that if, notwithstanding NATO and the U.N. and our own diplomacy, Greece and Turkey go to war, the Western Alliance will be deeply shaken. As the United States has the only mobile reserve force in the eastern Mediterranean, American responsibility for maintaining a balance of power in Europe will be increased.

Since we are carrying virtually the whole burden of maintaining a balance of power in Asia, we cannot afford lavishly to overcommit ourselves by signing blank checks on our military power. We have signed too many of them already.

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