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POST

McCARTHYISM IS THREATENING US AGAIN

By Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr.

American public opinion, the Louis Harris poll tells us, "is rising toward increased militancy about the Vietnam war and a get-it-over-with mood." No doubt this is so: The fear of a hopeless stalemate in Southeast Asia is evidently producing a hunger for drastic solutions. It is not so much hawks vs. doves any longer as it is people becoming simultaneously hawks *and* doves and saying, like Sen. Richard Russell of Georgia, that we should either jump in with both feet or get out altogether. Among the early casualties of this get-it-over-with frenzy are likely to be our national equability, good temper, moderation and reason. And, as the frenzy gathers speed, it may well bring in its wake a new testing of the national faith in liberty.

The last such testing took place 15 years ago. The more venerable among us may still recall the havoc—so absurd in retrospect—which a single senator then wrought in the workings of our government and the atmosphere of our society. Now, though he was unquestionably talented as a demagogue, it was not the quality of his demagoguery alone which gave Sen. Joseph McCarthy his influence. It was the fact that his demagoguery incited and interpreted acute hostilities and frustrations among the American people—hostilities and frustrations generated, in the main, by our participation in the war in Korea.

All wars generate frustrations, but the Korean War was peculiarly frustrating. It was a limited war, and, though the reasons for its limitations were cogent, they were imperfectly understood by many Americans. Moreover, if Communists were killing Americans in Korea, why should Americans be expected to tolerate for a moment anyone at home who could be said to sound or look like a Communist? And some Americans who perhaps felt they ought to be in Korea found it easy to expiate their guilt and affirm their virility by joining Sen. McCarthy's anti-Communist crusade. It was not until after the Korean armistice concluded the frustrations on which the senator thrived that the nation began to awaken from the nightmare.

If history repeats itself—and history sometimes does—the war in Vietnam ought to produce something roughly comparable to the McCarthy phenomenon. The Vietnamese war is just as frustrating as the Korean War and a good deal harder for most people to understand. The Korean War was a clear-cut case of invasion across frontiers; it entirely lacked the dimension of internal revolt which gives the struggle in Vietnam its peculiar difficulties. Moreover, the United States fought in Korea as the representative of the United Nations with the unqualified blessing of most of the world. while today it fights in Vietnam substantially alone. And we had a relatively stable government as our partner in Seoul as against the military junta in Saigon.

This is not the place to discuss the merits of the Government's policy in Vietnam. For our purposes one need only note that, for better or for worse, we seem to be moving toward a deeper involvement and a wider war. This, I believe, is the condition which we must anticipate and for which we must prepare. As the war increasingly dominates and obsesses our national life, we can look for the appearance of associated symptoms: the oversimplification of issues, the exchange of invective, the questioning of motives and loyalties, and the degradation of debate.

As this process continues, the emotional advantage will be increasingly on the side of the flag-wavers. Some of these will be tempted to pay off old scores as they wrap themselves in Old Glory. Thus the Georgia legislature has already refused a seat to a man, twice duly elected, because it disapproves of his views on Vietnam. Thus an American Communist who won the Distinguished Service Cross in the Second World War has been forbidden burial in Arlington Cemetery. Thus a lieutenant in the Army was sentenced to two years' imprisonment at hard labor (later reduced) and discharge from the service for taking part, while off duty and in civilian clothes, in a demonstration against the Vietnamese war. Thus a ninth-grade teacher who stood silently during a flag salute at a school assembly because he did not agree with the Vietnam policy was expelled from the American Federation of Teachers. Thus groups of protesters against the war have been beaten up in several cities; a federal judge in Philadelphia has demanded that all publicly supported colleges expel student protesters; various draft boards have terminated protesters' deferments, presumably on the weird theory that military service is a punishment; and children, too young to be drafted, have been suspended from high schools in Cleveland and Pittsburgh for wearing black armbands in mourning for the dead in Vietnam. Thus Sen. James Eastland of Mississippi has introduced a bill conferring broad powers to the State Department to restrict travel by American citizens overseas—and the State Department has called for surveillance of an eminent Harvard professor on his trips abroad. A former Vice President of the United States has even detected the hand of the unsleeping Communist conspiracy in the fact that the DuBois Clubs—the Young Communist League of the 1960's, so called after W. E. B. DuBois, the Negro historian who joined the Communist Party before his death—should have been given a name sounding so

much like that of the Boy's Club of America. This, according to the vigilant Mr. Richard Nixon, was "an almost classic example of Communist deception and duplicity."

These are still relatively scattered incidents. But, as the sense of frustration grows, such incidents may multiply. They may create a climate where people begin to refrain from saying what they believe lest they get into trouble. Before we know it, we may be developing an atmosphere which only requires a new McCarthy to become a new McCarthyism. Certainly we should reflect a moment as a nation before we let Vietnam thrust us back to this.

What are the chances of preserving our national poise this time? For one thing, the intensity of the national administration's commitment to the Bill of Rights can make a vital difference. The reason why the Second World War (with a few exceptions, such as the internment of the Japanese-Americans) was comparatively unstained by assaults on civil freedom was the libertarianism of Franklin Roosevelt and his administration. Similarly, McCarthyism was more or less contained during the Truman years. It broke out of control only when the Eisenhower Administration brought an attitude of indifference to the White House and one of positive collaboration with McCarthy (Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, for example) to the bureaucracy. Today, while President Johnson has manfully spoken up for the right to dissent, one cannot be sure to what extent his heart is always in it. There were strange notes in his Honolulu attack on critics of his Vietnam policy as "callous or timid . . . blind to experience and deaf to hope," as well as in his later Chicago outburst about "nervous Nellies" who break ranks "under the strain" and turn "on their leaders and on their country and on their own fighting men." It is hardly prudent for any President to insist on a conception of unity which, on closer examination, means no more than obedient and unquestioning acceptance of government policy. ...

Moreover, the Joint Chiefs of Staff 15 years ago unanimously opposed the escalation of the Korean War and thereby had a calming effect on national opinion. But today the Joint Chiefs seem just as unanimously in favor of the escalation of the Vietnamese war, with all that implies. And the State Department, which strove last time for rationality in debate, is this time actively implying that criticism of the war should stop because it cheers up Ho Chi Minh. Criticism of a war always cheers up the enemy, but I do not recall that any government official admonished Lincoln to stop criticizing the Mexican War on grounds that it gave aid and comfort to Santa Anna.

Another difference between 1951 and 1966 is that then the liberal and intellectual community was united in the determination to maintain rational discussion. Today some of its members seem to be vying with the reactionaries in advancing the cause of irrationality. I have in mind especially the phenomenon of mass demonstrations.

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These explosions of political irrationality, whether on the right or on the left, have a number of things in common. For one thing, both tend to express what has been an ancient national weakness—that is, a susceptibility to the conspiratorial interpretation of history. We have always fallen too easily for the notion that complex historical developments are the result of the machinations of little groups of nasty men. This is what historian Richard Hofstadter has called "the paranoid style in American politics." It expresses itself today in the notion on the right that the Communists are fomenting the anti-war demonstrations in the United States, not to mention the Buddhist protests in Saigon and Hue—even perhaps in the theory, cherished, alas, in very high places in our government, that what we face in Southeast Asia is a premeditated and homogeneous system of Chinese aggression. And it expresses itself in the notion on the left that our Vietnam policy is dictated by capitalists seeking to expand profits or by generals plotting a preventive nuclear war against China. Both sides refuse to see history as it is—an untidy and unkempt process, in which decisions are taken, not according to master plans, but in darkling confusion and obscurity, and where ignorance, accident, chance and stupidity play a larger role than Machiavellian calculation.

The explosions of political irrationality have another feature in common: The function in each case is more to provide psychic satisfaction than to advance the cause in whose name they take place—more to ventilate emotions than to influence events. Refusing a man a seat in the Georgia legislature or a grave in Arlington brings us no closer to victory in Southeast Asia than walking out of a commencement address or burning a draft card deters a President from dropping napalm bombs. The serious restraint on the movement toward a wider war has not come, for example, from the mass demonstrations. It has been mostly the result of the courage and force of individuals, whether in the United States Senate or in local meetings or community teach-ins, who, acting out of a thoughtful analysis of the drift of our policy, have succeeded in bringing into existence a serious debate on our choices in the Far East. It has come, not from the outpouring of emotion, but from the application of reason.

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The nation will have to look to stouter and more principled figures if it is to contain another epidemic of political panic.

One place to look, I think, will be Washington itself. Responsible men in public life recognize the damage that a new outbreak of national hysteria will do both to our sense of purpose and the world's confidence in our leadership. Thus Secretary Robert McNamara said, in what seems a tacit rebuke to overzealous colleagues, "Whatever comfort some of the extremist protest may be giving our enemies—and it is clear from Hanoi's own statements that it is—let us be perfectly clear about our principles and our priorities. This is a nation in which the freedom of dissent is absolutely fundamental."

So Sen. J.W. Fulbright of Arkansas has issued thoughtful warnings: "The longer the Vietnamese war goes on without prospect of victory or negotiated peace, the war fever will rise, hopes will give way to fears, and tolerance and freedom of discussion will give way to a false and strident patriotism." So Sen. Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts protested to the State Department over the surveillance of the Harvard professor and brought this particular form of snooping to an end. So Sen. Robert Kennedy of New York read aloud on the floor of the Senate an editorial from the Washington *Daily News* condemning the decision not to bury the Communist war hero in Arlington. "We learn from our mistakes," the editorial said, "—and one of the lessons is that to hate and harry the sinner to his grave is hardly in the American tradition."...

I hope I am wrong in supposing that anger and frustration, welling up as a result of the Vietnam involvement, may portend another crisis of our national freedom. But if no such crisis comes, it will only be because individuals throughout the land take a clear and firm stand for sanity. "The men who create power," President Kennedy said a few weeks before he was murdered in the supreme act of political irrationality in our time, "make an indispensable contribution to the nation's greatness, but the men who question power make a contribution just as indispensable." In retrospect, we have always regretted our spasms of repression and persecution; we have gained nothing from them—McCarthy never found a Communist—and have invariably hated ourselves in the morning.

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