

Fulbright on Camera

by Alex Campbell

Because he is using his powers as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to pressure President Johnson into a change of foreign policy, the name of Senator J. William Fulbright was dropped with a clang from the White House social list for six months, from last September until this March, when President Johnson apparently decided that wasn't the way to influence an Arkansan. Fulbright's response to the cease-fire took the form of three Christian A. Herter lectures, delivered at Johns Hopkins, in which he defends his dissent from the consensus as "the higher patriotism," and defines his target as "the arrogance of power." Further, his committee is continuing its rigorous cross-examinations of Dean Rusk, who as Secretary of State has the job that Fulbright was almost offered by President Kennedy, and of Defense Secretary McNamara and others.

"In a democracy," Fulbright told his Johns Hopkins audience, "dissent is an act of faith. . . . The correction of errors in a nation's foreign policy is greatly assisted by the timely raising of voices of criticism within the nation. When the British launched their disastrous attack on Egypt, the Labour Party raised a collective voice of indignation while the military operation was still under way: refusing to be deterred by calls for national unity in a crisis, Labour began the long, painful process of recovering Great Britain's good name at the very moment when the damage was still being done. Similarly, the French intellectuals who protested France's colonial wars in Indochina and Algeria not only upheld the values of French democracy but helped pave the way for the enlightened policies of the Fifth Republic which have made France the most respected Western nation in the underdeveloped world."

Fulbright acknowledges that his committee's televised hearings "have been criticized on the ground that they conveyed an 'image' of the United States as divided over the war" in Vietnam. He has two answers to make to this. National consensus can have value, but it can also sometimes be spurious. And it is a patriotic duty not to be silent in the face of apparent error. "Since the country obviously *is* divided, what was conveyed [by the hearings] was a fact rather than an image. . . . I see no merit in the view that we

should maintain an image of unity even though it is a false image, maintained at the cost of suppressing the normal procedures of democracy."

For Fulbright, this is the heart of the matter, that began as far as he is concerned last September, when his attack on US intervention in the Dominican Republic as a "grievous mistake" suddenly made him the loneliest man in Congress in spite of his 24 years there. President Johnson's friend, Senator Dodd, attacked Fulbright's "tolerance of Communism." Other senators of both parties joined the attack. The House of Representatives passed, 315-52, an endorsement of armed intervention in Latin America to avert "subversive domination or the threat of it."

To Fulbright's "surprise and disappointment, much of the criticism was directed not at what I had said about the Dominican Republic and Latin America but at the propriety of my speaking out at all. . . . I was taken aback by the consternation caused by my breach of the prevailing consensus." This led him to reexamine the role of the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. Should party loyalty be his guide? Fulbright decided that it ought not to have precedence.

The previous August, 1964, Congress had received an urgent request from President Johnson for immediate adoption of a joint resolution about Southeast Asia. Fulbright served as floor manager of the resolution and did all he could to secure its prompt and overwhelming adoption. In doing so, he was influenced by partisanship: an election campaign was in progress and "I had no wish to make any difficulties for the President in a race against a Republican candidate [Goldwater] whose election I thought would be a disaster for the country." On August 7, Congress with only two senators, Morse and Gruening, dissenting adopted the "blank check" resolution, authorizing the President "to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force," against aggression in Southeast Asia. There had been only brief debate, and perfunctory hearings by Fulbright's committee. But, Fulbright declared in his first Herter lecture, since the resolution "the Administration has converted the Vietnamese conflict from a civil war in which some American advisers were involved, to a major international war in which

the principal fighting unit is an American army of 250,000 men. Each time that senators have raised questions about successive escalations of the war, we have had the blank check of August 7, 1964, waved in our faces as supposed evidence of the overwhelming support of Congress for a policy in Southeast Asia which in fact has been radically changed since the summer of 1964."

"Patriotic Liturgy"

This and the Dominican Republic experience are the twin motors of Fulbright's assaults on his country's foreign policy. But just what he would like to see in its place he himself does not seem too clear about. Sometimes he says his modest aim is merely to "create a greater degree of caution" in the Administration. He can be quite happy and hopeful about the fate of critics like himself: "I see it as a mark of strength and maturity that an articulate minority have raised their voices against the Vietnamese war and that the majority of Americans are enduring this dissent, not without anxiety to be sure, but with better grace and understanding than would have been the case in any other war of the 20th Century." But then he warns almost in the same breath: "We are succumbing to the arrogance of power [and] not living up to our capacity and promise; the measure of our falling short is the measure of the patriot's duty of dissent. The discharge of that most important duty is handicapped in America by an unworthy tendency to fear serious criticism of our government. In the abstract we celebrate freedom of opinion as a vital part of our patriotic liturgy. It is only when some Americans exercise the right that other Americans are shocked. . . ."

His definitions of American "arrogance" fluctuate widely. At one moment, it takes the form merely of "drifting into commitments which, though generous and benevolent in intent, are so universal as to exceed even America's great capacities." Then he says that "the great majority of the human race are demanding dignity and independence, not the honor of a supine role in an American empire," and accuses this country of suffering from a psychological need to prove itself bigger and better, because stronger, than other nations.

Fulbright is terribly conscious of American power; the US, he says, is "powerful as no nation has ever been before and the discrepancy between US power and the power of others appears to be increasing." And he tends, sometimes, to equate power with evil. Thus he argues that the American impact on Vietnam has become as fatal to the Vietnamese as Captain Cook's discovery of Tahiti was on the Tahitians, who were "corrupted by the white man's diseases, alcohol, firearms, laws and concepts of morality." In the same

way, apparently, Saigon (which Fulbright has never visited) "both literally and figuratively has become an American brothel." Saigon is no more an American brothel, literally or figuratively, than was Seoul, Berlin, Rome or wartime London. But the point Fulbright really wants to make is that wherever the United States goes in the world, it takes with it, according to him, "the condescending attitudes of a people whose very success breeds disdain for other cultures." Americans, he insists, "become boorish when they are in somebody else's country and treat the local citizens as if they weren't really there"; the Americans "stamp around in sloppy clothes, drink beer and shout to each other." All this boorish behavior he attributes to their "consciousness of belonging to the biggest, richest country in the world." Further, he charges Americans with "trying to inflict our particular version of democracy" on Koreans, about whom we know nothing and actually care less, and on "ungrateful Latin Americans who stubbornly oppose their North American benefactors instead of the 'real' enemies we have graciously chosen for them."

Fulbright isn't just rewriting *The Ugly American*. For evidence of his thesis, he goes back as far as the Gilded Age, and triumphantly quotes Mark Twain. But he misses the point. For Mark Twain called his Americans abroad innocents, not boors. "The peoples of those foreign countries," the quotation runs, "are very ignorant. They looked curiously at the costumes that we had brought from the wilds of America. They observed that we talked loudly at table sometimes. . . . In Paris, they just simply opened their eyes and stared when we spoke to them in French! We never did succeed in making these idiots understand their own language." It is a sad indication of what Vietnam has done to us all that the normally urbane Fulbright quotes the passage to prove in deadly earnest that American "arrogance" was rife then as now. It was more rife then than now. Few if any Americans still defend the 1898 war with Spain, echo President McKinley's belief that it is America's duty "to educate the Filipinos," or agree with Albert Beveridge's description of Americans as "a conquering race." But, in that case, what becomes of Fulbright's judgment that "gradually but unmistakably we are succumbing to the arrogance of power?"

Fulbright is a courageous man, when he feels a cause is worth being brave about; but he is never very sanguine that Americans, or other men, will behave with courage or intelligence. He is, he says, "without illusions as to the prospect of success" when he seeks to "bring reason and restraint" to the discussion about Vietnam. "Past experience provides little basis for confidence that reason can prevail in an atmosphere of mounting war fever. In a contest between a hawk and

a dove, the hawk has a great advantage. . . .” He, alone in the Senate, voted against Joseph McCarthy getting funds to continue his evil work; and McCarthy did not prevail. But, says Fulbright, “It is by no means certain that the relatively healthy atmosphere in which debate is now taking place will not give way to an era of McCarthyism.”

That’s at home. Abroad, “we must stop fooling ourselves about economic progress in many of the countries that receive American aid . . . democratic methods are more often failing than succeeding in Asia, Africa and Latin America . . . violent upheavals are . . . very likely. . . .” And that’s not the worst that’s likely to happen. A “fatal expectancy” is leading the US and China “toward a tragic and unnecessary war.” People insist on being optimistic; Fulbright will have none of it. “We seem to feel somehow that because the hydrogen bomb has not killed us yet it is never going to kill us. This is a dangerous assumption. . . .”

Hamlet’s own conscience worried him as much as the evil he equated with the King; so does Fulbright’s. He was the only senator who seriously tried to turn Kennedy against the invasion of Cuba in 1960 that became the horrible fiasco of the Bay of Pigs. But, at the time of the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, Fulbright was among those whom President Kennedy summoned to the White House. “When the President asked for comments, Senator Russell and I advocated the invasion of Cuba by American forces.” Fulbright did so “on the ground that a blockade, involving as it might a direct, forcible confrontation with Russian ships, would be more likely to provoke a nuclear war than an invasion which would pit American soldiers against Cuban soldiers and allow the Russians to stand aside.” He now says tartly that “had I been able to formulate my views on the basis of facts rather than a guess as to the nature of the situation, I might have made a different recommendation”; and he rather sourly consoles himself that, in any case, “the decision to blockade Cuba had already been made. The meeting at the White House broke up after 6 p.m. and President Kennedy went on television at 7 p.m.” to tell the American people. But he evidently finds it difficult to forgive himself for having proposed an American invasion of Cuba, and he now believes that the Cuban revolution “is unquestionably Cuban” and that Castro is “highly popular with the Cuban people.” He says the “facts” are that there are twice as many schools now as before the revolution, “formerly landless peasants . . . have been given small plots,” “almost everybody . . . has a job,” “children are well fed.” But “most important of all is the sense of dignity and national pride associated with the revolution. After six decades of being an economic colony of the United States, Cubans are immensely proud of Castro’s successful defiance of the

North American giant.” This, apparently, far outweighs executions after kangaroo trials.

Why, then, does the US persist in hostility toward Cuba, Fulbright asks, and replies that it is because “our sympathy for those who cry out against poverty and social injustice . . . dissolves into hostility when reform becomes revolution; and when Communism is involved, as it often is, our hostility takes the form of unseemly panic. . . .” And he gives the Dominican Republic as an example. “Rather than use our considerable resources to compete with the Communists for influence with the democratic forces who actively solicited our support, we intervened militarily on the side of a corrupt and reactionary oligarchy.”

But what was Fulbright doing when that was happening? The answer is: Nothing, just like all the other congressional leaders who were called, once again, to an emergency meeting at the White House. This time it was April, 1965. “We were told that the revolution that had broken out four days before in the Dominican Republic had gotten completely out of hand, that Americans and other foreigners on the scene were in



danger, and that American marines would be landed in Santo Domingo that night for the sole purpose of protecting the lives of Americans and other foreigners. None of the congressional leaders expressed disapproval of the action planned by the President." But subsequently the Senate Foreign Relations Committee undertook an exhaustive review of the Dominican crisis in closed sessions. The review convinced Fulbright "beyond reasonable doubt" that, while saving lives may have been a factor, the major reason for the April 28 intervention was "a determination on the part of the US government to defeat the rebel, or constitutionalist, forces whose victory at that time was imminent." Fulbright observes bitterly that "had I known in April what I knew in August, I most certainly would have objected to the American intervention."

General James M. Gavin, and General Matthew B. Ridgway who commanded the United Nations forces in Korea, have both testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that they share Fulbright's fears that this country's Vietnam involvement may deepen into war with China. Trying to get Americans to see the situation the way the Chinese may see it, Fulbright has asked: Suppose a Chinese army of 250,000 was fighting in Mexico, and Chinese bombs were dropping within 40 miles of the Rio Grande? But Fulbright admits that many Americans — who he says are "severely if not uniquely afflicted with a habit of policy-making by analogy" — use a different analogy from his, and "equate North Vietnam's involvement in South Vietnam with Hitler's invasion of Poland, and represent a parley with the Viet Cong as another Munich." They shouldn't. Fulbright thunders: "The treatment of slight and superficial resemblances as if they were full-blooded analogies . . . is a substitute for thinking and a misuse of history." Instead of being so peevish — or arrogant? — Fulbright might have seized the opportunity offered by the Herter lectures to explain why his analogy is superior to the more common one, why the other analogy, with Hitler and Poland, is all wrong. Thus, he might have put a decisive end to tiresome repetitions of the Munich theme. What in fact he did, was portentously to declare: "The value of history is not what it seems to prohibit or prescribe, but its general indications as to the kinds of policies that are likely to succeed."

Thailand Next?

What kind of policy does Fulbright think might succeed in Vietnam? Of course, he wants a compromise, and darkly hints that the Administration doesn't. "We may be thinking about how disagreeable it would be to accept a solution short of victory . . . we may be thinking about our reputation as a great power, as though a

compromise settlement would shame us before the world." Just the sort of unworthy thinking that stamps the US as arrogant. However, Fulbright concedes that there *are* American proposals to negotiate peace in Vietnam. Unfortunately, the North Vietnamese view them as "fraudulent plots . . . to trick them into yielding through diplomacy what we have been unable to make them yield by force." Meantime, Fulbright hopes there will be very careful consideration on the American side before enlarging the war; but he fears "that we are now expanding our commitment to Thailand in the same disorderly way that we became so deeply involved in Vietnam. There is still time, however, for the Senate to insist that any new commitment to Thailand be contracted in full accord with our constitutional procedures, including full and frank debate."

In the course of trying to educate the nation on foreign policy, Fulbright has been educating himself about China, particularly the wrongs done to that country by the West last century. One consequence of the antagonism between the US and China, he says, is that both of them "seem to think of each other as abstractions: to the Chinese we are not a society of individual people but the embodiment of an evil idea, the idea of 'imperialist capitalism'; and to most of us, China represents not people but an evil and frightening idea, the idea of aggressive Communism." Both have been at pains to dissociate the rival government from its people, though actually it is as foolish to imagine that most Chinese are alienated from their government as it is to suggest, which Peking does, that most Americans oppose theirs. It seems unlikely that either the Chinese people or their government will take kindly to Fulbright's suggestion, in the third Herter lecture, that the way to handle China is to apply to it the rules that are "desirable in dealing with paranoid individuals." The Chinese might even call this a typical instance of American arrogance.

"It would do the United States no harm in the short run," Fulbright says, "and perhaps considerable good in the long run, to end our opposition to the seating of Communist China in the United Nations, and, depending on events, to follow that up with some positive suggestions for more normal relations. The United States has already proposed visits by scholars and newspapermen between China and the US and, although these proposals have been rejected by the Chinese, it might be well, though not too often and not too eagerly, to remind them of the offer from time to time."

When Fulbright quits fulminating against American arrogance and gets down to brass tacks about specific foreign-policy steps — "cutting the cackle and getting to the 'osses" as they say in Oxford, where he was a Rhodes Scholar — it's awfully hard to see why his views should seem to upset President Johnson.