

Season of Silence As War Continues

By Marquis Childs

SENATOR J. William Fulbright's office has just politely declined the 734th invitation to speak. They come from universities, service organizations, clubs and high schools in every corner of the country in such a flood that the only possible response is a standard form of regret.

This continuing flood is the more surprising, since Fulbright is not only the most outspoken critic of the Administration's Vietnam policy but is also a gloomy prophet of threatening doom and disaster in the growing Vietnam involvement. So gloomy on the score of America's path toward downfall was the Senator's speech to the American Newspaper Publishers Association that even friendly critics chided him.

The televised hearings on China policy and foreign aid stimulated the requests. But Fulbright's staff members who are handling the letters and telegrams say that in many instances the requests reflect a deep and often troubled desire to hear debate on the widening conflict. A careful reading of the full text of the ANPA speech shows that the Senator, aside from the paragraph that made the headlines, was not wholly pessimistic, since he ended with the hope that the United States can avoid the doom of other civilizations that have overreached their power and capacity.

As to a debate, the Senator is rather like a man who turns up all prepared for the contest and finds the other side has decided to rest on past statements. Whether it is judged shrewd politics or wise statesmanship or a little of both, President Johnson has decreed that this must be a time of silence. With respect to Vietnam and the war, the President is setting the example in this department. He turned down the ANPA, the American Society of Newspaper Editors and the 50th anniversary dinner for Pulitzer Prize winners. These are the kind of audiences that Presidents in the past have welcomed as a forum for their views.

THE LINE the President means to take on Vietnam in the fall campaign and perhaps beyond seems clearly marked. He puts the war and all its attendant troubles above partisanship on the score of the national interest. At his last press conference, called on a few minutes' notice, this was shown in the following exchange:

Reporter: Mr. President, do you think

the Vietnamese war will hurt the Democrats in the fall election?

The President: I don't believe that any of you want to make this a Democratic or a Republican Army or Air Force or Navy war. I never use the party term in connection with the servicemen and what they are doing. I don't see many people that do. I try to talk to the leaders of both parties in this country about the national interest, and I have never seen many of them put their party ahead of their country. I doubt that they will.

When he went to Houston to appear at a Democratic fund-raising dinner—the President's \$1000 club—he took the same line. While reporters were not admitted, excerpts of his remarks read to them afterward contained the same exhortation—put America first if you want to seize the larger victories of peace, freedom and prosperity. "Let us join hands; trust in God's hands," he said, "so we can together bring peace to the world and a richer, better life to all who seek it."

For those close to Johnson in his years as boss of the Senate, during which he was irritated by Democratic attacks on the Eisenhower Administration and frowned on the Democratic Advisory Council, this is a familiar approach. It is reinforced today by the grave uncertainties prevailing in Vietnam over the conduct of the war, the proximity of elections and the inflation ravaging the economy.

THE PROFESSED belief in the White House is that the elections in Vietnam are a sign of political vitality. But no one is saying this very loudly, since it is possible that either the elections will never be held or that they will result in chaos and confusion. A new military coup precluding an election in the foreseeable future is not ruled out. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge will shortly confer with the President, and he may provide clues to the future. But the word is that he will be under wraps during his stay in this country.

As for Fulbright, he speaks next week in San Francisco at the urging of his old friend, Harry Ashmore, formerly editor of the *Arkansas Gazette* and now with the Center for Democratic Studies at Santa Barbara. That is the last date on his calendar. There is little more to be said, he feels, since events, with a continuing movement of troops up to 400,000 by the year's end, will determine the future.

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