

Editorial

The state of the consensus



Sen. J. William Fulbright



William McChesney Martin

According to a recent report on the Washington diplomatic scene, Sen. J. William Fulbright, the distinguished chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, was not invited to the White House dinner for Chancellor Ludwig Erhard of Germany. He wasn't invited to the dinner for Prime Minister Harold Wilson of England either, or to the dinner for President Mohammed Ayub Khan of Pakistan. The implication was that President Johnson, who now is issuing his pronouncements on the state of the Union, didn't approve of Senator Fulbright's criticisms of the Administration's policy in Vietnam and the Dominican Republic, and that he chose this petty discourtesy in retaliation.

It was not only a discourtesy to Fulbright, who has a constitutional duty to state his views on U.S. foreign policy. It was also a discourtesy to Messrs. Erhard, Wilson and Ayub Khan, who do not necessarily share the President's hostility toward his critics. More important, though, the social ostracism of Senator Fulbright illustrates a major weakness in Lyndon Johnson, and indeed in many men of great power: the unwillingness to accept criticism and dissent.

The President reacted rather similarly in his recent controversy with William McChesney Martin, chairman of the Federal Reserve Board. Unlike Johnson's official hierarchs, who profess to believe that we can finance both a major war in Vietnam and a major domestic spending program with the scrip of presidential pronouncements, Martin puts his trust in fiscal orthodoxy, and he became convinced that the Johnson program would be dangerously inflationary. Unlike Fulbright, Martin has the authority to take independent executive action, so he applied a brake to the economy by raising the federal discount rate one half percent. The White House reacted with indignation, and word leaked out that Martin had been precipitous in raising the rate before the Administration's new budget was completed. Thus, it was said, he had violated the principle of coordinated economic planning. Martin's answer was blunt. He had been trying to get White House approval for the move since October, he said, with no success. Like Fulbright, he had followed his own conscience. While one may argue the merits of the decision—and we happen to think both Fulbright and Martin can make persuasive cases for their views—the basic point is that Lyndon Johnson seems unable to believe that any rational man could possibly disagree with him on any subject.

Nor are these the only instances of presidential autocracy. The Washington press, of course, has long since learned that the President does not take kindly to anything less than outright flattery. And in the White House itself, the departure of McGeorge Bundy represents the departure of one of

the last advisers noted for a genuine independence of mind and will. Bundy's replacement, by all reports, will by no means wield the kind of authority Bundy used to have. As for the once-vociferous Hubert Humphrey, he is learning that Lyndon Johnson regards Vice Presidents about the way the Victorians regarded children—to be seen and not heard. There is a Victorian quality, in fact, about the whole White House nowadays. Father knows best, and Father's word is law.

It may be argued that Presidents are entitled to their share of human vanity, and that they have traditionally lashed out at what they consider the stinging nuisance of hostile mosquitoes. John F. Kennedy, for example, made a point of publicly canceling the White House subscription to the New York *Herald Tribune*, and Harry Truman threatened to commit assault and battery against a Washington music critic who failed to appreciate a concert by the President's daughter. Still, granted these human excesses, it remains true that what every leader needs most is advisers who will tell him the truth, even if the truth means an accusation that the leader's policy is a bad one.

President Johnson has been widely described as a believer in the politics of consensus, and, in a nation of the size, power and complexity of the United States, this is doubtless a wise course. Certainly, no policy that is favored by a majority of Americans can long be obstructed by a few lobbies; just as certainly, no policy put into effect solely by presidential power can overcome the hostility or merely grudging acceptance of a large number of citizens.

But what is the real meaning of a policy of consensus? It is not the authoritarian demand that everyone consent to decrees from the White House. It is not the dark suspicion that anyone who criticizes the President is a Birchite, a Communist or an idiot. "Come, let us reason together," used to be President Johnson's favorite maxim, but when we reason together, we do not necessarily agree on every detail. The essence of the American consensus—and it does exist—is that most Americans are pragmatists, not ideologues. They want progress—with law and order—at home. They want peace—with law and order—abroad. On the definition of these broad concepts, there will never be universal agreement, but most of us are prepared to accept and support policies we don't quite agree with, as long as they are policies we can live with. As Republican Sen. George Aiken put it recently, there is a difference between "self-generated consensus and consensus arising out of full and free discussion." Consensus, therefore, is not an area of shining truth in the midst of a sea of darkness but a grayish area where myriad different opinions converge. Only here can any President be sure that his people, despite their reservations, truly support him.