

T.R.B.

from
Washington

Off the Track

★ A strange world we live in. America, with all its wealth, finds its dollar endangered. America, with all its might, finds its troops stalemated. America, with all its cities, finds them unsafe. America, with all its pride, finds its president circumscribed in movement.

Mr. Johnson, in an election year, hesitates to travel openly for fear he may be embarrassed or injured by demonstrators. White House reporters are given a couple of hours' notice before a trip and told to pack, they don't know for how long or for what destination. The presidential party when it arrives at a city goes unheralded in unmarked cars through unsuspecting streets and arrives before surprised audiences.

Surely something is wrong. Surely the United States has gone somewhere off the track. But the secretive President holds the cards to his chest and offers a confident face as he makes the critical decision whether to send an additional one to two hundred thousand men to Vietnam. His press conferences have long since been discontinued; even the Senate Foreign Relations Committee can't get solid assurance that its opinion will be weighed before the decision is taken.

We watched Secretary Rusk before the Fulbright committee last week. Nobody won, everybody was unhappy.

Mr. Rusk returned the ball as hard as it was served. He showed steely certitude and kept his temper. Grant his postulate that S.E. Asia falls if Vietnam falls, and that America must live up to every line of every containment treaty spun by Dulles or have its faith questioned, and there is an arguable case. We were fascinated by the big,

bald man patiently fixing his gaze at the glittering water pitcher and then answering stoutly. Most of the committee questioned or assailed his premises. A good man defending a bad case, because it is contrary to common sense to imply that we may have to destroy Vietnam to save it; or to think that any other small nation wants to be "protected" by the US at such cost. God save them from such protection.

One man who was sitting pretty at the hearings was Wayne Morse, one of the two who voted against the original Tonkin Gulf resolution (along with Ernest Gruening). "I don't have to explain or alibi my position!" he told the other sheepish senators. In England the government would have fallen that made such a disingenuous presentation as that on Tonkin.

We sense a great shift of public opinion on Vietnam going on, yet how can Mr. Johnson extricate himself from his fix? We are not arguing the morals of the thing but the politics. If he should try to backtrack now he would admit a mistake or defeat and the Republicans would spring on him like wolves; every nation loves a scapegoat. So we guess that the official Johnson policy will be "more of the same."

But you could feel the shift in public sentiment right there in the Senate committee. A couple of years ago they whooped through the Tonkin Gulf business; now there seemed to be only four or five convinced hawks left. Other evidence abounds: Gallup says 49 percent now think the war "a mistake," and 69 percent dream of replacing US soldiers with South Vietnamese.

The Mouse That Roared

★ Then there is the New Hampshire primary and the mouse that roared. Sen. McCarthy glided about the state with an "excuse me" attitude at first, and ended up with 42 percent of the votes! That is about 21 percent more than TRB would have given him when he was up there three weeks before. All of a sudden the curious candidacy caught on. Mr. McCarthy is the pet of the reporters because he is everything that a presidential candidate is supposed not to be and so he is fun to watch: witty instead of shrill, composed instead of noisy, talking sense

instead of nonsense.

Then again, all these starry-eyed kids brought into his campaign are attractive, some of the hippies even making the supreme sacrifice of lowering hemlines, or shearing whiskers, for their stately, knightly leader whom they regard as presiding over a sub-station of Camelot. Ah well, it's an odd sight to see a gang of students suddenly wondering if maybe the machinery of the democratic process may be a substitute for withdrawal and pot.

There's a change of US sentiment on when Rocky prepares to enter the fray and when suddenly Bobby Kennedy kindly proposes to relieve Gene McCarthy of the burden of opposing Mr. Johnson. But perhaps what impressed TRB most as a journalist is the change in tone of some of our contemporaries.

That radical old organ, *The Wall Street Journal*, suddenly came through with an editorial about the mess in Vietnam that sounded like a leader in the *NR* about two years ago. We began looking about among other magazines. *Look* has an enormous circulation with no editorial policy, so there was no use looking there. But we noticed that *Time* which puts its editorials in its expletives has dropped all these snide adjectives with which it used to transfix the silly critics of Vietnam. And here was *Life* declaring under an editorial headed, "Vietnam: Let's not have more of the same," that it's time to "reassess" strategy while "de-escalating." For heaven's sake. What would Henry Luce have said, and the China Lobby? "The strategic bombing of North Vietnam, beyond the rear of the battleground, should be halted," it said. We are speechless.

Finally, *Newsweek*, which has fine columnists both for and against the war, took its own position of advocacy, March 18. All we can hope to achieve now is "stalemate," it said. America should stop large-scale search-and-destroy operations, "and withdraw its major forces from the sparsely populated borders." A former paratroop commander (evidently a craven) and executive officer of a big Massachusetts management consultant firm (evidently a pinko) once recommended that. Yes, Lieut.-Gen. James M. Gavin; that's the man.

We must hunt up some other crusade. Our position is getting too popular.