

Pull-out, All-out, or Stand Fast in Vietnam?

ONE OF OUR MOST deeply embedded traditions asserts the supremacy of the civilian authority over the military. It follows that the only justification for a military policy is to support and execute the policies decided by our civilian authorities. Military effort must always be so closely tied to the political objective that at no time do we risk a mushrooming, unlimited war, while the political goal remains definitely restricted.

What troubles many good citizens, people who support the President as I do, is exactly where the balance lies between our military and our political objectives in Vietnam, and whether, in fact, the military effort may soon be dominant, if, indeed, it is not already so.

The cry of "Why are we in Vietnam?" echoes two of the questions I heard from soldiers and civilians in December, 1950, when I took command of a defeated and dispirited army. "Why are we in Korea?" and "What are we fighting for?" were the queries then. As the new commander, intent on rebuilding confidence and the offensive spirit, I had to answer.

I told our troops that we were in Korea because we had been ordered there by properly constituted authorities. The loyalty that we gave and expected barred any questioning of those decisions. As to what we were fighting for, my answer was essentially this: "The real issues are whether Western civilization shall defy and defeat communism. This has long ceased to be a fight for freedom of our Korean allies alone. It has become a fight for our own survival in an honorable, independent national existence."

Today, in Vietnam, I think questions like these are rarely asked. Our combat forces seem to have a better understanding of why they are fighting than do many people at home. The soldiers draw no parallel with the Korean war, for many of them hardly recall that conflict. They know that we are using armed force to repel an armed aggression that seeks to impose Communist control over people who reject that tyranny. In Korea, our obligation was a moral one. In Vietnam, we have a treaty obligation: The Southeast Asia Treaty of 1954 and its Protocol commit us to help with armed force when a nation in the treaty area asks for our aid, as South Vietnam has done.

It should be perfectly clear, then, that the President has but one basic course to pursue. He must honor our treaty commitment while concurrently making an intensive effort to find some honorable and acceptable solution. He must also enlist the greatest possible support—diplomatic, economic and military—from the greatest possible number of nations, to bring the fighting to an end and to



Gen. Matthew B. Ridgway, who commanded the United Nations forces in Korea, questions our political and military objectives in Vietnam, and applies the lessons of Korea.

lessen the danger of drift into a catastrophe of unimaginable proportions.

Currently, a great deal of loose talk in the U.S. tends to increase the probability that our military effort will become divorced from the political objective and we will stray toward nuclear disaster. When presumably responsible citizens urge upon the nation, "Let's get it over with now. Let's plaster Vietnam and China too!" or "Let's bomb North Vietnam back into the Stone Age!" the danger of our losing all sight of our political objective becomes very real. These hardy folk, who, like Omar Khayyam, are ready to "take the cash and let the credit go, nor heed the rumble of a distant drum," would be talking sense only if our political objective were unlimited—the imposition of a *Pax Americana* upon the entire world—and if we confessed no national morality whatever.

We cannot ignore this moral question. Other-

wise, we retreat overnight to the jungle from which the human race took millennia to crawl. The civilian authorities themselves bear much responsibility for the widespread confusion among well-meaning people over the military situation and our political objectives. Within the past two years, pronouncements on our military efforts by highly placed authorities have ranged from rosy euphoria to grim foreboding. As for our political aims, we have been chided for not grasping "the simplicity of our basic objectives" in Vietnam. Yet we have been given numerous definitions of those objectives: to contain communism; to halt aggression; to prove to Communist leaders that aggression cannot be made to pay off; to support "the right of a people to choose their own government"; to help the South Vietnamese realize their desire to "live in the way they prefer"; and to assist a helpless people "to advance toward economic prosperity and social improvement." As recently as December 7, 1965, Sen. J. William Fulbright called for the negotiation of "an honorable compromise." On the same day, Secretary of State Dean Rusk was quoted: "There is no room for compromise" on Vietnam.

Our military objective has been frequently and beguilingly described as "victory." This word always rings gladly on American ears. What American does not want to win any fight he gets into? It is a deeply ingrained national trait to go all out for victory, using whatever force we possess. There is, we are told, and we foolishly agree, "no substitute for victory." But we are not dealing with a lawsuit, a prize fight or a football game. We live in a world very unlike the one we were raised in. We have a potential for wholesale destruction so indescribably vast that many words, including "victory," lose their meaning. It would hardly be counted a "victory" if one football team were to defeat another through the use of knives; neither would weavor triumph in a "victory" that would reduce three-fourths of the civilized world to rubble.

With no clear-cut limit upon our immediate military objective, we commit ourselves to an upward-spiraling course that may approach annihilation. If we decide to employ whatever force is needed (and no one is wise enough to estimate now how much that will be) to achieve victory in Vietnam, do we double, then triple, then quadruple our ground forces? And if victory even then eludes us, do we extend the war to wider and wider arenas? And if we still fail to eliminate all resistance, do we then use nuclear weapons?

We cannot thus engage to achieve victory at whatever cost unless we have already announced an unlimited political objective: i.e., the complete subjection of the outside world to American dom-

"A halt should be called soon to control our military buildup."

ination. And I cannot see in the current situation anything to justify the setting up of so rash a goal as that. But if, in the light of their greater knowledge of the situation, our highest civilian authorities believe that something like this should be our goal, then the public should be told immediately. If our policymakers do not believe in aiming for such a goal, and there is certainly no indication that they do, then a halt should be called soon to control our military buildup.

In my opinion, it is the immediate duty of our civilian authorities to define more precisely and pragmatically just what is our political goal—assuming it is something less than global defeat of all resisting forces. At the very least, we should have what Sen. Karl Mundt called for recently in a TV debate moderated by Eric Sevareid: "A declassification of policy from the White House to the Senate, where that policy can then be debated." With that objective precisely fixed, the size of the military effort needed to attain it could be clearly determined. With our aims loosely described only as "freedom for the people to choose their way of life" or as "standing up to communism," we have drifted from a point where we were told, a scant two years ago, that our military task would be largely accomplished and our troops withdrawn by December, 1965, to a point where the faint outline of a half-million troop commitment becomes a distinct possibility. And even that commitment is not offered as a final limit. The situation remains, to use Sen. Mike Mansfield's apt phrase, "open-ended," and we have made, to date, I believe, an unconvincing argument to our people that our goals lie within the zone of vital national interest that cannot be compromised. The falling-domino theory—if Vietnam falls, then Laos, Thailand and all south Asia will collapse—is a theory I have never accepted. Like many other premises upon which people tend to rest their position, it is deserving of more searching analysis than it generally gets.

I am fully aware that I am speaking in generalities. Whatever course I propose or whatever action I oppose, I still cannot deal in specifics. The plain truth is that no individual, outside of the top levels of Government has, or should have, access to enough inside information to do otherwise. I have no private sources of top-level intelligence and no access to top-level military plans. Yet the proper functioning of a democracy demands that the conscientious citizen speak his carefully considered views. Only then can patriotic and competent officials, civilian and military, who bear the ultimate responsibility for decisions, find the guidance they must have. The recent hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee served an admirable purpose in stimulating public thought and discussion of one of the most difficult problems this country has had to face.

Many of those who have thoughtfully endorsed a widening or an intensifying of the war have spoken, I believe, from the conviction that they have been applying the lessons learned in Korea. Lessons can be learned from Korea. But there are far more dissimilarities between the two actions than there are parallels. In South Korea, we had a workable government, led by a fiercely patriotic and powerful civilian leader whose opposition to communism was widely known and who held the allegiance of the majority of his people. We acted in concert with many nations and had been deputized by the United Nations to repel the aggressor in its name.

Relatively little terrorist activity occurred in South Korea. United Nations personnel rode in open Jeeps throughout our zones without ever drawing an assassin's fire. Our power easily contained guerrilla activity, even though our forces were neither as well-equipped nor as mobile as they are in Vietnam. A unified military command kept both United States and ROK armies under the direct control of the U.S. commander. In short, our line of battle was well-defined, the enemy clearly identifiable, and the political divisions were sharp.

None of these conditions holds for Vietnam today. Yet we do have a "right" to be there, for our treaty obligation is clear and specific. I think we should take care, however, not to misread history in an effort to justify unlimited military effort. Most people will agree that we face confused, complex and unpredictable situations. Most people will agree that each contains potential perils of great and undetermined extent.

Confronted with such circumstances, would we not be wise to avoid further dispersion of our already overextended resources? Would it not be sound judgment to husband our strength and to refuse further far-flung commitments in an "open-ended situation" until we can discern more clearly the shape of things to come?

Again, we hear talk of "sanctuaries." Yet the bombing of sanctuaries never turns out to be a simple matter. During the Korean War, the Manchurian bases, the so-called sanctuary, were indeed wide open to attack from the air. We deliberately refrained from bombing them, as we refrained from taking out the vulnerable Yalu bridges. The advisability of carrying this war over the border into Manchuria in this manner was considered in the highest councils of our nation. The decision not to bomb the sanctuary was made for reasons that seemed then, and still seem, wise to me. Had

we attacked mainland China through air raids, we would have unleashed a war of unknowable dimensions. Not one of our major allies would have approved this adventure, and the coalition formed to stop Communist aggression would have dissolved. Furthermore, our "shoestring" air force (this was Gen. Hoyt Vandenberg's own description) would have dwindled, through combat losses and natural attrition, to a shadow. We would have been left without power to honor the many IOU's we had extended on a worldwide basis. The time then required to rebuild sufficient strength to honor our obligations would have been two years.

Nor should it be forgotten that the United Nations forces had their own sanctuary during the Korean conflict, just as we have one now in South Vietnam. Both China and the United States operated under self-imposed limitations as to the bombing of hostile bases. The Chinese air force in Manchuria and other nearby bases was strong enough to have done us major damage, not only in South Korea, but in Japan. Similarly, Red China now may possess the power to destroy Saigon and inflict heavy damage on our South Vietnam port facilities in one swift strike should we carry our air attack close to her own vitals.

China has the strength, too, to reopen the Korean front. Should we, in that instance, oppose her there, or should we withdraw to more defensible positions to the south and east, an unthinkable abandonment of our Korean allies? An attack upon mainland China might well bring Soviet Russia into the fray, with Western Europe open to immediate invasion. Where do we draw our line of defense then, and what weapons do we use? And where do we concentrate our strength?

These questions suggest the immensity of the problem the President and his advisers now wrestle with. Those men in public life who urge prompt

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"But I thought you were the female."

Victory through total devastation of a country is immoral

and unlimited escalation of the war are neither diminishing the problem nor strengthening the President's arm. They only make it even more difficult for the President to steer the nation on that careful course between duty and disaster.

And those who call for immediate disengagement from Vietnam, as if it had all been a mistake, likewise make the President's path more difficult. We cannot escape now from the obligations we took upon ourselves when we first pledged our word to the South Vietnamese. One lesson to be drawn from Korea is that we cannot pull out of a sticky situation without regard for those who have fought at our side.

During the Korean War, soon after the Chinese launched their New Year's offensive in January, 1951, serious thought was given in Washington to our abandoning the peninsula and pulling our forces back to Japan. (I opposed this strongly.) It quickly became clear that such a withdrawal would require the evacuation of at least a million South Koreans, those who had been our battlefield allies or had worked with us since the invasion. To have left them to the vengeance of the Communists would have been an infamous betrayal.

We are under similar obligation in Vietnam not to abandon the hundreds of thousands who have been our allies there. We cannot pick up and run home without making extensive and permanent provision for all the Vietnamese who have supported our arms. A concept like the one discussed by Gen. James Gavin, for holding fast to our defensive enclaves, would enable us to fulfill our obligation to our Vietnamese allies, before committing ourselves to unlimited military effort, while we continue to seek an honorable solution.

Korea also taught that it is impossible to interdict the supply routes of an Asian army by air power alone. We had complete air mastery over North Korea, and we clobbered Chinese supply columns unmercifully. Unquestionably, we inflicted serious damage upon the Chinese and greatly complicated their problems of reinforcement and supply. But we did not halt their offensive nor materially diminish its strength. The Chinese, like the Vietnamese, traveled light, with each man carrying his ammunition, his food and his weapon on his back. They moved at night or on hidden footpaths and goat tracks, immune from air attack. And where we did find their concentrations and strike them, we still could not force them off the disputed ground. In Korea, I saw whole sections of railroad bombed into scrap iron by aircraft, and yet the enemy rebuilt the tracks in a single night, and the trains ran the next day. After the Chinese repulsed the ill-fated advances to the Yalu, Gen. Douglas MacArthur himself expressed disillusionment with the value of tactical air power. It could not isolate the battlefield, he said, and its effectiveness had been greatly overrated. It is easy for the civilian mind to be seduced with talk of "easy" conquest through air power. But the crucial battles are still won by foot soldiers.

There is yet another lesson etched by our experience in Korea: It is folly to base military strategy upon our interpretation of enemy intentions. As our forces pushed toward the Yalu in the Home by Christmas offensive of November-December, 1950, the High Command assured all doubters that the Chinese had no intention of intervening in force because the psychological moment for this had passed, because "no commander in his bright mind" would send his forces across the Yalu

at this season and because of various other reasons understood only by those who had made a study of the "Oriental mind." We knew, however, that the Chinese were capable of dealing us a mighty blow along the Manchurian border, where our forces would be strung out almost haphazardly, without mutual support between commands and without supplies enough to sustain more than a light engagement. We knew that close to a hundred thousand well-disciplined and well-armed Chinese troops were mobilized on the other side of the

river. We knew that Chinese "volunteers" had already appeared in force south of the Yalu, for we had suffered severe attacks from them and had taken prisoners from units known to be in the Chinese order of battle.

Yet, despite this intelligence, we hurried forward in pursuit style, our forces thoroughly dispersed and improperly clothed for fighting in subzero temperature. We "knew" the Chinese were bluffing, and we "knew" they would never commit more than a token force of volunteers. We abandoned elemental prudence. Instead of being guided by enemy capability, we divined the enemy intentions. The mistake cost us very dearly in American lives and took us close to disaster. It might be pointed out, too, that MacArthur's earlier brilliant coup at Inchon, where he cut the enemy's lifeline in one spectacular and surprising strike, succeeded in large part because of his stated reliance on the enemy's assumption that no commander would risk the monstrous tides, the tortuous channel and the two-mile mud-flats outside Inchon harbor. Custer likewise "knew" that the Indians would not attack at Little Bighorn. And the French "knew" that Wolfe would never be fool enough to try to scale that precipice guarding Quebec.

We should be wary of experts who feel they can correctly interpret Chinese intentions and can predict how they will react to any move of ours. We know what the Chinese are capable of in Southeast Asia. This is the knowledge that should guide us in appraising our strategy.

The one final important lesson we can draw from what happened in Korea is that we cannot enter into agreements with the Communists unless we have iron-clad sanctions, underwritten by the world's major powers, including, if possible, the Soviet Union. Vietnam, as Sen. Joseph Clark pointed out in that TV debate I referred to previously, is only an incident. The major threat to our security and our way of life still comes from Red China and the Soviet Union. It is with our eye upon them that we must plan our global strategy. To do that calls for the best minds we can assemble in farsighted statesmanship and creative thinking.

Finally, I want to put proper emphasis on one aspect of the whole military and political problem that tends too often to be either minimized or ignored—that is the moral factor. In June, 1955, when I was chief of staff of the Army, I had occasion to address a letter to the Secretary of Defense regarding the military defense of the United States. My conviction, pressed in that letter, remains unaltered:

"Just as the ultimate and most deadly threat of communism is the destruction of the religious and moral principles which . . . have guided man to new heights of dignity and self-respect . . . so also do we find the same threat in the increasingly significant ignoring by our planners of the consequences of omitting the moral factor in considering the use of the immense destructive capability which now exists in the world . . ."

It is my firm belief that there is nothing in the present situation or in our code that requires us to bomb a small Asian nation "back into the Stone Age." While we should be prepared to pay any price in order to live up to our obligations, there must be some moral limit to the means we use to achieve victory. A victory that would require the wholesale devastation of a country by nuclear arms because it would not yield to conventional force would be the ultimate in immorality. END

GENERAL RIDGWAY'S NINE POINTS FOR VIETNAM

1. *We should emphatically reject the two extreme courses—"Pullout" or "All-out war"—that have been advocated by certain groups.*
2. *We should give our full support to the President's determined efforts to fulfill our treaty obligations and to honor our pledges, while at the same time seeking an honorable solution of the basically political problem in Vietnam.*
3. *With due regard for diplomatic secrecy, our Government should spell out, more specifically and pragmatically, our immediate and long-range political objectives, firmly rejecting any unlimited political objective that might entail unlimited military effort.*
4. *We should also reject any political involvement that might gradually commit us to military efforts that would jeopardize our basic security and those vital American interests that cannot be compromised.*
5. *Once having announced our political objectives within the framework stated above, we should then employ whatever force is needed to attain them.*
6. *We should categorically reject "preventive" war, employing nuclear weapons, the use of which would be, in my opinion, a deliberate move down the road of international immorality past the point of no return.*
7. *We should enter into formal agreements with the Communist leaders of Southeast Asia only after establishment of enforceable sanctions to guarantee the permanent protection of the South Vietnamese people.*
8. *We should sign no instrument with those leaders without prior agreement in good faith among a group of nations, including, if possible, the Soviet Union, to join in fairly sharing the task of applying proper sanctions.*
9. *We should repose complete confidence in the capability of our military leaders in Southeast Asia to accomplish any mission they may be assigned, for these men are among the best that our nation has produced.*