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Nixon or McGovern?

Vietnam: Not So Much an Issue as a Test

It is entirely appropriate to the history of the Vietnam war that in terms of American public participation it is ending on election eve as it began and as it has been conducted all along—in ambiguity and uncertainty. Nobody now can tell you about the future makeup of whatever government is going to be ruling in Saigon, and yet this is what this war has been all about. Not knowing the outcome, there is no way to judge whether the cost in lives and money and anguish in the Nixon years and before will ultimately seem to have been justified.

If this leaves wide open the judgment that history will hand down on the longest and, in some particular ways, the most painful of American wars, it also leaves open any firm judgment of the role played in it by the President who will present himself for election, with peace as his proudest promise, next week. And so, to some considerable degree, the Vietnam issue has become not so much an issue as a case study of both candidate's style and of their approach to the responsibilities of government—the approaches that led one to offer, and the other to conduct, over the past several years two distinctly different war policies.

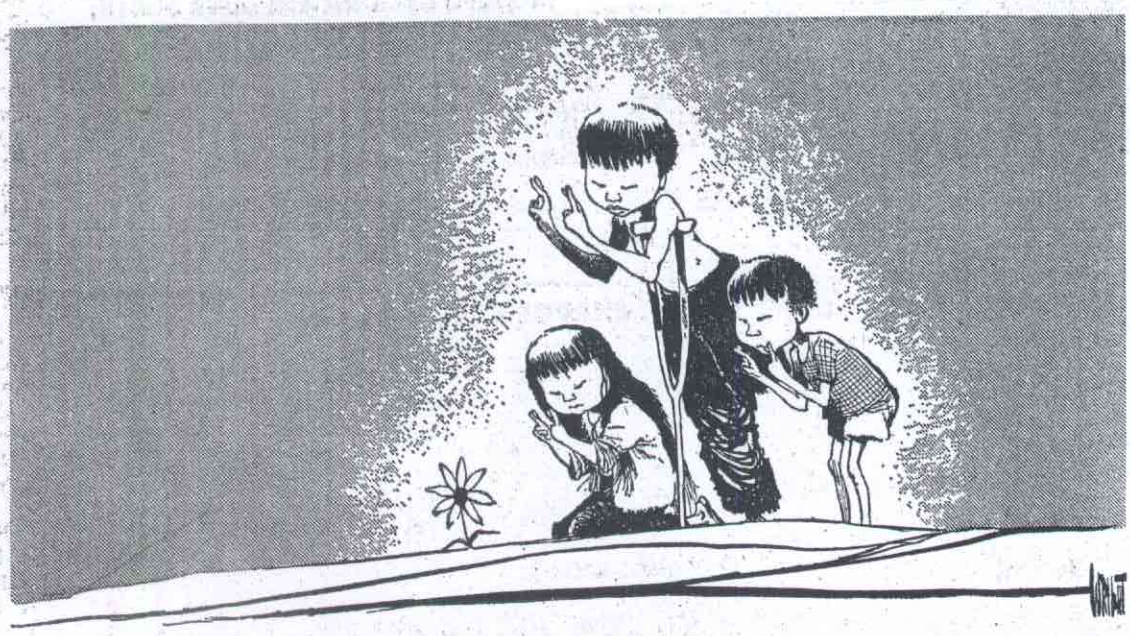
For it can no longer be said that Senator McGovern is offering a solution to something Richard Nixon seemed not to be able to solve. Similarly, it can no longer be said that President Nixon, by the removal of 500,000 American troops and by ending the draft and by bringing us close to a settlement, has entirely failed in his firm commitment to have this war done with in his first term. On the contrary if you accept his view of the importance of Vietnam in the larger scheme of our national security, he and Henry Kissinger deserve the highest marks for their skill and their courage and their persistence. But that is not the same thing as saying that the President should not be held accountable for the manner in which he has conducted the war, and that Senator McGovern should not be judged by the manner in which he has opposed it.

We would begin with the observation that Mr. McGovern, earlier than most men, had the right inclinations and the right instincts. He was sensitive to the damage that the war was doing at home, and persuaded at an early stage and quite rightly, we would argue, that the objectives publicly claimed were neither attainable nor worth the cost. But as with so many other things (welfare, defense spending, to name two) he overstated an overly simplistic case; we doubt he could live as President with his Vietnam policy if confronted with an ongoing American involvement for there is a fundamental contradiction, in our view, in his moral opposition to the war and the morality involved in the crippling blow he would have this country deal its South Vietnamese ally as it made its way abruptly out of what it had originally proclaimed to be an enobling joint enterprise. He raised a tormenting issue, amnesty, at a time when it was not relevant and offered no more than a hope for the recovery of our prisoners of war. Indeed, the best thing that can be said of the McGovern war policies is that he has qualified them whenever they were closely questioned—so that in the end, and to a degree his policy in practice, we would guess, would be something other than it has seemed to be.

With Mr. Nixon, on the contrary, there is far less to guess about. While out of office he too had a plan which differed fundamentally from that of the President in power at the time. The mining of Haiphong harbor and the bombing of the North should have come as no surprise to those who remembered his predilection in the sixties for air and sea power and "hot pursuit" and all the rest. But that was not the way he was talking by the time of the 1968 campaign or in his early days in office. And if that was in fact the way he wanted to end the war, then one must ask why he put it into practice piecemeal, in Cambodia and in the Laotian "incursion" and then finally with the resumption of the bombing of the North earlier this year. If the answer is that he thought it would be too dangerous to do that in 1967, without the resetting of the stage that resulted from his Peking and Moscow initiatives, then you have to ask why it would not have been even more so in 1964 and 1965, when he was proposing it.

The explanation, we suspect, is that in fact he

had no plan, that he stumbled into precisely the same miscalculations made by his predecessor. He continued to overestimate the capabilities of the South Vietnamese and to underestimate the resourcefulness and the resiliency of the North. When Clark Clifford proposed a timetable that would have removed all American forces from Vietnam by the end of 1970, Mr. Nixon let it be known that he hoped to do better than that. There were seasoned veterans in the federal establishment who had come to believe that the North Vietnamese could carry on the war for a long time, even against heavy bombing, that the South Vietnamese were a poor bet, that pacification was a



Wright in the Miami News.

sometime thing; and that neither this country's standing in the world nor the destiny of Southeast Asia was really at stake in the outcome of the Vietnamese war. These arguments were made to him—and ignored.

And so was another vital lesson of the Johnson years—that the people were tired of being toyed with, that dissent was real. Starting fresh, Mr. Nixon had running room and every reason to offer the public forthrightly a new and more realistic policy consistent with the then demonstrable limitations on our capacity to influence the Vietnam struggle, and with the public's war weariness. He could have said, frankly, not only that we had done all you could reasonably expect us to do but that the country had in fact bitten off more than it could chew. Instead he warned us of the "pitiful helpless giant" we could become in the eyes of the world if we did not prevail in South Vietnam, not seeming to notice how helpless we had already made ourselves to appear. Instead he tortured the hardliners of his own constituency with visions of the terrible things he would not abide: "surrender . . . a Communist takeover . . . the staining of our honor . . . being the first President to lose a war." Whatever his private assessment, he encouraged the public to accept nothing short of sure success, even though by then it was plain to see that in this war nothing could be settled without imposing upon both North and South Vietnam a considerable risk of losing everything, while granting both some hope of gaining politically what they had been unable to gain in war. "What is on the line in Vietnam," he said, "is . . . peace in the Mideast, peace in Europe, and peace not just for the five or six or seven years immediately ahead of us but possibly for a long time in the future." Thus, Mr. Nixon piled ever-increasing stakes on the outcome of a conflict which this country was becoming increasingly less capable of influencing and the irony is that by prolonging the war and its agony he has so conditioned the American public against this sort of enterprise or anything remotely like it that it is difficult to see what practical value the Nixon version of the Vietnam lesson could conceivably have in any of those potential "Vietnams" which he tells us are simmering all over the globe.

If Mr. Nixon failed, along with his predecessor, to level with the people, he failed even more so with Congress; it would have taken little more than some spirit of accommodation to make the painful disengagement of this country from its involvement in Vietnam a genuinely bipartisan effort. Instead, he rudely rejected even the mildest congressional efforts to legislate an end to our involvement in

the war. And so there was a continuing constitutional conflict, and while it may have been Mr. Nixon's prerogative to stand on his rights as President, having done so it was scarcely logical or reasonable for him then to blame his congressional opposition for something close to treasonable aid and comfort to the enemy, for prolonging what he insisted was *his* war, and his alone, to wage, and for endangering what he believed was *his* "peace" to win.

We would not argue that the loss of South Vietnam to communism would have no consequences, merely that the chances of its not happening have been increased only marginally in the last three years and eight months, and that for most Asians, our departure and South Vietnam's continuing vulnerability to the North have both largely been discounted in advance. We would not claim that Mr. Nixon could have gotten four years ago the same arrangements he seems to be getting now, only that there may not be all that much to choose between what he will now get and what would have happened if he had disowned the policy of his predecessor and moved far more rapidly to return the destiny of South Vietnam to the South Vietnamese. We would merely put the question: What would have happened if Mr. Nixon in 1969 had told us that we must carry on, not to "win" or to guarantee South Vietnam's independence indefinitely, but in pursuit of a settlement which would open up at least the strong possibility of a shared role —that is to say a "coalition" government—with the Communists in the South; which would permit the stationing of considerable numbers of North Vietnamese in southern territory and concede huge though admittedly unpopulated chunks of South Vietnamese soil to the enemy—and that we would be called upon to sacrifice 20,000 more American lives and spend $60 billion over almost four years for the sake of achieving this particular result?

For that proposition at that time, he would not, in our view, have been able to muster much more than a corporal's guard—and justifiably. So it does not seem unfair to us, when one is judging the performance of a President and his qualifications for re-election, to take this into account—even while acknowledging the skill with which he and Dr. Kissinger have managed to bring American involvement in this war so close to an end in a way, and on terms, which they no doubt believe to be in the best interest of this country's national security.