

Ball on Vietnam

Part 2/15/66

You have rendered a major public service by publishing the full text of Under Secretary of State George Ball's recent speech on Vietnam. Mr. Ball has successfully articulated in one speech all of the basic assumptions on which American policy toward Asia has rested since the Korean War.

The best hope for freedom and security in the world, says Mr. Ball, depended on maintaining the integrity of the post-World War II arrangements and preventing the Communists from "unsettling the precarious power balance between the two sides of the Iron Curtain." It was this conviction, he adds, "that led America, in the years immediately after Korea, to build a barrier around the whole periphery of the Communist world by encouraging the creation of a series of alliances and commitments from the eastern edge of the NATO area to the Pacific."

Here, in two sentences, are lodged three dubious propositions: Communism is monolithic, an expansive force stretching from the "Iron Curtain" to the Pacific; Asian communism (actually seen as Chinese communism) is best contained by a barrier of military alliances; and it is the role of the U.S. to set and enforce the rules of collective security.

The first assumption is undetermined not merely by the deep and bitter Sino-Soviet split, but also by the historic animosity of the Vietnamese toward the Chinese. The Vietnamese spent 1000 years under China's rule and even those who live under a Communist regime in North Vietnam have no desire to repeat the experi-

ence. To ignore this fact is to ignore a living reality, Vietnamese nationalism.

The second assumption, containment of Asian communism primarily through military alliances, ignores the local conditions which generate social and political revolutions. It anticipates only military aggression and occupation. When applied in Vietnam, it highlights the fundamental failure of U.S. policy: inability to understand what causes and sustains a revolt.

In 1956, Diem refused to hold the reunification elections proposed by the Geneva Accords; abolished the elected chiefs and councils in the villages, where 80 per cent of the people live; and set up detention camps for "all persons considered dangerous to national defense or collective security." Thereafter ensued what most independent historians have described as a ruthless and systematic campaign to wipe out all opposition, real and imagined. By 1957, according to Bernard Fall, guerrilla warfare was spreading in South Vietnam as a direct response to Diem's persecutions. Only later did North Vietnamese aid become an important factor.

It is the civil war of 1957 which has expanded into the international war of 1966. And it is precisely Washington's insistence upon creating a pro-American military alliance in South Vietnam in 1954, based on an unrepresentative and ultimately hated regime, which planted the seeds of the civil war.

As for the third assumption, it places the U.S. in the position not only of policeman to the world, but of lawmaker, judge and jury as well. Who

gave us this right? Was it the fact of American power? If so, other nations and groups of nations also have power, and might want to establish their own rules. If we were so interested in defending "the integrity of the postwar arrangements," why didn't we make more of an effort to use the worldwide body, the United Nations, which emerged from that war "to maintain international peace and security"?

Mr. Ball has provided the answer. The U.S. "had to create an effective counterforce in the Far East if Communist domination were not to spread like a lava flow over the whole area." To make a major policy statement on Vietnam which likens the threat to an impersonal, relentless force, while never once mentioning the Diem regime, the Geneva Accords, or Vietnamese nationalism is to take a mechanistic and highly selective view of complex realities. This same myopia has enfeebled American policy in Asia since the days when President Truman abandoned Franklin Roosevelt's commitment to anticolonialism and undertook the fruitless effort to help the French retain their hold on Indo-China.

A glimmer of new insights emerges toward the end of Mr. Ball's speech—acceptance of a neutral Southeast Asia, recognition of changes in the Soviet Union, hope of a comparable development in China. Perhaps it is not too hopeful to expect that basic assumptions may also evolve in Washington.

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