

Post 6/24/77

Ball on Vietnam: A Necessary Voice

By Marquis Childs

WHEN UNDER Secretary of State George Ball leaves the Government in the early fall, the view from the top on Vietnam will be unanimous. The departure of the one dissenter is the climax of a quiet drama unique in the Kennedy-Johnson era.

It has been no secret in Washington that for at least three years Mr. Ball has consistently opposed in the private councils of Government the escalation of the war. In public he has been completely loyal to the Administration. While their views have often been diametrically opposed, Mr. Ball and Secretary of State Dean Rusk share a mutual respect that is the basis for their friendship.

The Under Secretary's leaving has no relation to his opposition to Vietnam policy. He is going because, having worked the 12-hour day and seven-day week for five and a half years, he is bone tired. His relationship with the President is friendly, with Mr. Johnson speaking up frequently in National Security Council meetings to say, "Let's hear George's point of view."

George Ball has been playing a lonely and an extraordinary role that only the historians can put in proper perspective; but, this personal drama aside, the unanimity of the view at the top is a fact of life at what seems a critical juncture for the Administration. For there is every evidence that opinion in the country is fragmenting, as doubts spread in a dozen different directions.

SELDOM IF EVER has any foreign entanglement in the Nation's life generated so much controversy. By comparison, the Korean war, until the later phase, was accepted more or less passively. The Vietnam war is generating an ever-expanding literature from observers and analysts here at home and abroad. Week after week the volume increases, and the great preponderance is critical of the American position.

A remarkable series of articles has been appearing in the Paris newspaper *Le Monde*, written by Robert Guillain, who has spent 30 years in Asia. The series, which will in all probability be in book form as well, examines the current American stance and finds it virtually hopeless insofar as any possibility remains of winning the Vietnamese people to our side. Analyzing the infiltration of the Vietcong into every aspect of life in South Vietnam, includ-

ing the high ranks of government, Guillain concludes that up to a full division has infiltrated the Saigon area.

The rule here is to dismiss French criticism because, so the line goes, they failed in their war in Indochina and they cannot believe the Americans can succeed. But far from being a Gaullist organ, *Le Monde* is one of the few independent newspapers in France.

On another level is Philip L. Geyelin's book, *Lyndon B. Johnson and the World*, which is being widely read here. Although it covers the whole range of the Johnson foreign policy, inevitably it centers on Vietnam. The question Geyelin raises is whether consensus is a sufficient guide in such a perilous passage as Vietnam, with the ever-looming threat of a wider war.

To the expanding library on Vietnam Bernard Fall has contributed several volumes out of his long background in both North and South Vietnam. These are men with not merely opinions but authoritative knowledge. There is no evidence, however, that any of this penetrates the circle of advisers who shape Vietnam policy.

That circle is hermetically closed. Recently a knowledgeable Asian analyst was passing through Washington, and a White House aide was asked if the President would not be interested in picking his brains. The reply was that the President was not in the least interested in talking to any writer or commentator on Vietnam.

THE PRESIDENT talks with a great many people about what is for him a constant source of anguished concern. But he talks to them. He talks as a persuader. He talks as he did when he was majority leader in the Senate and his goal was to win and hold a majority.

President Johnson inherited the dilemma of Vietnam, and at what point he might have found a way out his critics seldom say. He also inherited the advisers who shaped the initial Vietnam policy under President Kennedy, and he has clung to them with a grip that at times resembles that of a drowning man.

It is because the advice of the Under Secretary of State has been contrary to the top-level consensus that his departure means more than a mere shift in the foreign policy hierarchy. Short of some opening for new ideas, for exchange of opinion that may be contrary to the consensus, the blind alley is likely to have no exit.