

WASHINGTON

COURAGE TO BE WRONG

BY KENNETH CRAWFORD



Senate discussion of the Vietnam war has emerged from cloakroom into committee room and shortly will become a full-dress debate on the floor. Consideration of President Johnson's requests for funds to pay for military and civilian operations in Southeast Asia is providing the occasion for the Senate to advise and consent. Consent is fairly certain, but it won't be given without protest from an increasingly vocal coterie of critics. Secretary of State Rusk got a taste of what is to come at a recent four-hour session of the Foreign Relations Committee.

With Chairman Fulbright showing the way, members of the committee undertook to wash their hands of Vietnam. They all but disowned a resolution adopted by Congress in 1964 authorizing the President to take "all necessary steps, including . . . force," to sustain the U.S. position in Vietnam. They said this had conferred only temporary authority. Rusk insisted that it meant what it said.

However, this is only part of Fulbright's disagreement with the Secretary, whom he accuses of stiff-necked resistance to compromise. Fulbright seems to be one of a group that believes collaboration with the Russians to pressure Ho Chi Minh into a compromise peace agreement might convert Ho into an Asian Tito. This group would accept peace terms less rigid in their guarantees of South Vietnam's independence than Rusk and the President deem necessary.

RIDICULE

The Ho-can-be-Tito school has never been very strong in the Senate, and Hanoi's scornful ridicule of the Johnson peace offensive hasn't made it any stronger. Most senators, even those who, like Fulbright, are anxious to find a way out of Southeast Asia, believe Ho's potential for freedom from Chinese influence is an illusion, though many would welcome, as Rusk himself would, help from Russia in bringing Hanoi to a peace conference.

Fulbright is unquestionably the most dashing, but questionably the most effective, leader the anti-Rusk doves could have. He is possessed of a questing intellect, a high order of literary talent and an adventurous political spirit. The Fulbright scholar-

ships have made him a celebrated world figure. Recent speeches in which he has admonished Americans to think "unthinkable thoughts," about such matters as diplomatic intercourse with Peking, have made him a darling of the liberals in spite of his consistent anti-civil-rights stand.

His speech against the Administration's intervention in Santo Domingo enhanced his liberal image but chilled his relations with the White House, which, in spite of denials, remain chilly. His initial refusals to handle Mr. Johnson's 1965 foreign-aid bill, combined with a decline in the prestige of the foreign-relations committee, has cooled some feelings about him in the Senate, too.

PEACE AT ANY PRICE?

Fulbright's reputation for prescience in foreign affairs rests heavily on his warning to President Kennedy before the Bay of Pigs that this adventure was ill advised. What is forgotten is that his advice was given in a context of indifference to the Russian buildup of military facilities in Cuba, even missiles and fighter planes. A strong inclination toward peace at any price runs through almost all of Fulbright's many pronouncements on foreign policy. He has challenged the worth of U.S. victories in two wars.

In June 1961, he said: "I suppose it would be less comfortable if the Soviets did install missile bases in Cuba, but I am not sure that our national existence would be in substantially greater danger . . . nor would I think that such bases would substantially alter the balance of power in the world." Fortunately, both President Kennedy and Congress disagreed.

Fulbright never stirred up angrier hornets than he did after the election of 1946, in which the GOP won control of Congress. He pointed out that under a parliamentary system President Truman would have resigned and turned his office over to a Republican Secretary of State. Truman, thinking this a suggestion by a former Rhodes scholar that he abdicate, replied: "What this country needs is more land-grant colleges."

It must be acknowledged that Fulbright has that rare thing in politics: the courage to be wrong. But does he have to keep proving it?