
The Washington Post **O**utlook

SUNDAY, MAY 21, 1967



With every new escalation, the struggle in Vietnam approaches a plateau of violence at which the next steps could lead to all-out war, possibly with Russia and China. At this point in time and terror, the questions arise anew: Who makes our decisions and by what process?



How We Deal

Who are the hawks and the doves in the Administration? Where does power lie or inclination lead among McNamara, Rusk and Rostow? If the President directs our war, does he see where we go next? For three weeks, a team of Washington Post reporters composed of

With the



Philip Geyelin, Murrey Marder, Chalmers M. Roberts and George C. Wilson, aided by William Chapman, Andrew J. Glass, Richard Harwood and Carroll Kilpatrick, interviewed major Administration officials to find at least the beginnings of answers and to try to describe . . .

Vietnam War

THE WAR IN VIETNAM is run by Lyndon Baines Johnson more directly, and probably more intimately, than any President has run any previous war. And up to a point, he runs it with much the same techniques he used to manipulate the United States Senate.

But only up to a point. The President's predilection for "holding the options open," his passion for cloaking his every move in secrecy, his penchant for withholding his commitment until events force it from him, his mastery at playing conflicting forces off against

at playing conflicting forces off against each other—all these traits are basic to his war management. And they make the war that much more confusing to millions of Americans.

To the relative handful of Johnson-watchers of another day, they are the familiar trade marks of a strikingly successful Senate Majority Leader.

But the analogy can only be carried so far, and not simply because the war in Vietnam is incomparably less manageable than the Senate. By its nature, it is probably a lot harder to manage than any other war in history.

Yet the manner in which it is run could scarcely be more pertinent at this moment, for the Vietnam struggle, by the reckoning of most of the President's principal advisers, is almost certainly approaching a crucial turning point.

Peace prospects have seldom seemed so bleak. But the President is also rapidly reaching the limits of what can be done in the way of piling more military pressure on North Vietnam without dramatically altering current policy against the deliberate bombing of non-

military targets, such as population centers; and against expanding the ground war into Cambodia, Laos or North Vietnam.

Of course, he can continue the present type of military pressure.

Or he could opt for a more passive policy, based on a still-controversial concept of putting together a physical barrier across Vietnam, and perhaps Laos as well.

But not even his closest advisers would venture to predict with assurance what he will do. Some significant clues, however, emerge unmistakably from an examination of the process by which he reaches his decisions, of the contradictory counsel he receives and of the influences at work upon him. Not the least of these influences is the frustrating nature of the war itself.

A War of Imprecision

ITS AIM IS not to conquer, but to foreclose conquest. It employs armed force, but in intricate combination with political, diplomatic and psychological weapons. It is essentially a war

of response and reactions to the enemy's moves, or to Saigon politics, or to the ebb and flow of battle, or to entreaties for peace from the United Nations or the Pope. Nobody can safely say how, let alone when, it will end; or what, precisely, we should expect when it does.

This very imprecision invites unprecedented pressures at home and abroad to expand or contract our military effort, to enlarge or play down the probing for peace. The result is that essentially tactical decisions which in other wars would be reserved for the

Government's war councils are up for continuous general debate.

In one sense, all this is made to order for a former Majority Leader who was never an initiator or creator as much as he was one who harnessed forces, or balanced them, or tried, to bend them according to his needs.

But the combination of an exceptionally complex war and an exceptionally complex President also makes the decision-making process that much more complex.

When Mr. Johnson finally reaches a major decision, he is often obliged, as

President, to propound it publicly in terms far more sweeping and binding than he was accustomed to using in the backroom during his Senate days. This doesn't always happen, however. In the day-to-day operation of the war, important moves are made in strict secrecy and confided to the public later, if at all.

But every move is calculated by some inscrutable computer within the President. It blinks and hums and roars and suddenly falls silent in baffling fashion as it devours an endless diet of policy papers, statistical data, news-

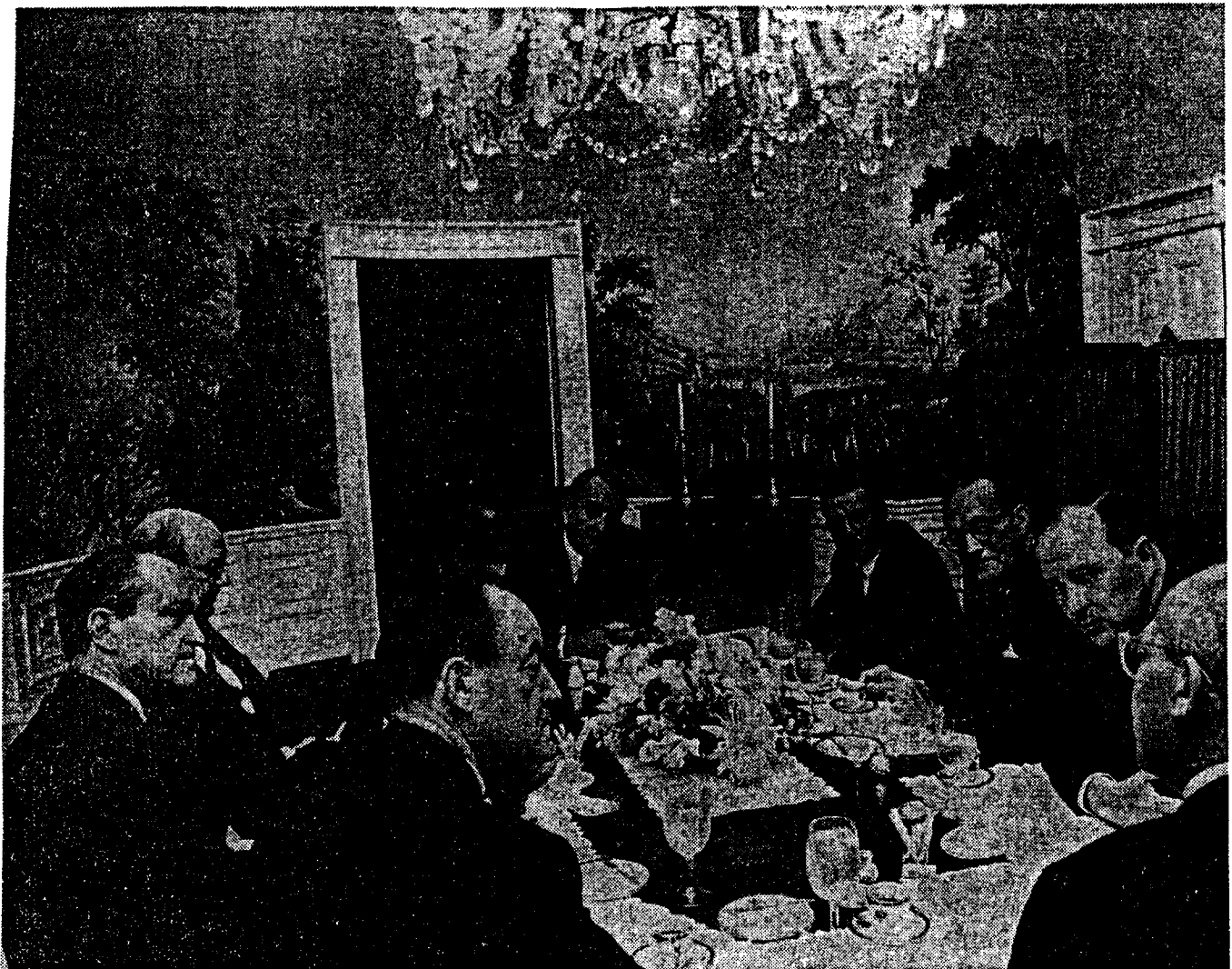
paper gleanings, formal recommendations of responsible officials and informal advice and counsel from a variety of individuals.

A Remarkable Instrument

THE JOHNSON COMPUTER is a remarkable instrument in its ability to sort and weigh, and in its appetites. But like all such instruments it is the prisoner of what is fed into it. And what it is fed often is sharply contradictory, not always reliable or even factual, and sometimes not even strictly relevant.

Intelligence reports in any war are often hit-or-miss and the reporting from Vietnam is all the more so. Casualties, enemy infiltration rates, pacification progress, Saigon's internal politics—all of this is difficult to pin down. But the President's burning impatience encourages "constructive" and "positive" accounts of what is going on.

Though the President is the first to insist that he is hearing all sides of every argument, he himself cannot be sure and critics insist the picture he gets is markedly less rounded now than it was when McGeorge Bundy and Bill



The Tuesday Lunch: Last week's gathering in the President's Dining Room at the White House included the five regulars plus three guests. Clockwise from the President are Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara (a regular), Gen. Earle G. Wheeler, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (an occasional participant), Presidential Press Secretary George E.

Christian (a regular), Presidential Special Assistant W regular), Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey (a regular), Central Intelligence Agency director Richard Helms (a regular) and Secretary of State Dean Rusk (a regular). The lunches, on days other than Tuesdays, are held in the President's Dining Room.

—he pretty much dismisses that prospect now.

The main reason is that Hanoi shows no real signs of buckling, and the supply of even marginally-useful military targets, which do not present an excessive risk of confrontation with China or Russia, is running out. By some accounts, there are only about 50 such targets left, of which only about a dozen are rated of importance by the President, and only one, Haiphong Harbor, is really of major significance.

As of now, however, the harbor is off limits; all the President's principal advisers seem to agree that it carries with it too high a risk of hitting Soviet ships.

Accordingly, the prospect of sudden, sweeping shifts in strategy looks remote. Despite the Marines' plunge into the DMZ two days ago, the same arguments that weigh against carrying the bombing of the north much further weigh even more heavily against outright full-scale invasion of North Vietnam.

And these arguments are not lost

alternatives—"more of the same" in the north, more effective pacification, and a more drawn out struggle focusing in the South; and, ultimately, a more effective shield to shut out the invaders from the North.

Vice President Humphrey is pressing the latter approach on the President. There is no real evidence that the consensus at the Tuesday Lunch is otherwise. Nor is Mr. Johnson unaware of the caution notes coming regularly from such old Soviet hands as Averell Harriman and Ambassador Thompson. If he does not consult Sen. Mansfield as often as the Majority leader would like, it is hard to believe he discounts the well-known Mansfield view.

Events could radically alter any assessment of what may come next. Today's assault on the DMZ could conceivably be tomorrow's sortie into North Vietnam, if the military situation deteriorated seriously enough. Events, to a large extent, are running this war, and the momentum has an ominous look.

But if there is one clear conclusion

offset the input from the advocates of all-out war—and the other way around.

Thus an advocate of a bombing pause, for example, can come away from the Johnson Treatment made in defense of the need to bomb and be convinced that the President is the hardest of hard liners. Mr. Johnson deals in hyperbole; when he makes a point, he makes it ten-feet tall.

Conversely, a critic who questioned the Administration willingness to negotiate might come away overwhelmed by the President's preoccupation with the urgent need to reach a peaceful settlement.

Spasmodic Rhythms

A PPEARANCES CAN deceive in other ways, in part because the war has a rhythm all its own. It has moved in spasms of peace probing followed by intensified military pressure. Whichever spasm is current, when the President talks publicly, he is often as not addressing himself to Hanoi or Moscow or Peking.

The temporary appearance of a pol-

be firmly based on his popularity, that set-backs on one front can imperil the other.

More specifically, the polls play a part in any campaign to impress this country's will and resolve on the enemy. So domestic politics, as only this



are a good deal more complicated than simple logic can encompass.

"There are two kinds of over-estimates at work here," says one official. He says that while the diplomats have consistently over-stated the danger of wider war with China or Russia, the military men have as consistently over-stated the probable effectiveness of air power as a persuader of Hanoi, or even as a means of stopping the infiltration of men and supplies to the South.

Some advisers worry that the President may come to discount the chronic anxiety of the diplomats. But most insiders insist he is less likely to take chances on that score than he is to sour on the incessant demands of the military for just one more turn of the screw.

It is not too much to believe that Lyndon Johnson, the Senate tactician who was ever ready to test where the weight of opposing views resided before disclosing his own hand, may be playing his principle Vietnam advisers