

# The cool way out

By Ronald Steel

**THE BITTER HERITAGE: Vietnam and American Democracy, 1941-1966.** By Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. Houghton Mifflin. 126 pp. \$3.95.

Moving over from adviser to critic, Arthur Schlesinger Jr. here joins the swelling chorus of those who oppose the Johnson Administration's Viet Nam policies. In a brief but eloquent and hard-hitting attack marked by his usual brilliance of style, this eminent commentator to the corridors of power makes a notable contribution to the seemingly inexhaustible list of books about the Viet Nam war. Trying to stay somewhere near the middle of the road, seeking to placate the doves without alienating the hawks, and attempting to be a dissenter without cutting himself off from those who exercise power, he urges us to "recover our cool" and slow the war down before our rhetoric gains the upper hand over our judgment. A search for a "middle course" that will presumably allow us to emerge with the remnants of our honor and our interests intact, *The Bitter Heritage* is a plea for moderation, detachment, and skepticism.

Gleaned from three magazine articles which appeared last year, this book examines how we got in Viet Nam, what we are doing there, why the Administration thinks it is important to stay, and how we might be able to disentangle ourselves. As an eminent historian who has both examined and tasted power, Mr. Schlesinger probes what went wrong in Viet Nam and why "we find ourselves entrapped today in that nightmare of American strategists, a land war in Asia—a war which no President, including President Johnson, desired or intended." As one of the leading intellectual figures of what might be called the government-in-exile, Mr. Schlesinger mercilessly probes the weak points of the Administration's arguments and policies. His style is lucid, his analysis perceptive, and his remedy, while somewhat circumspect, is highly persuasive.

Viet Nam, Mr. Schlesinger points out, "is a triumph of the politics of inadvertence." We are there not because of a deliberate decision taken with full regard for its impact, but through a series of small steps, each one "reasonably regarded at the time as the last that would be necessary." The fatal steps began when Roosevelt's plan for an independent Indochina was transformed, under the logic of the cold war, into Truman's decision to help the French retain their prize Asian colony; when the Eisenhower Administration examined this program of military-economic support and, following the Geneva Agreements of 1954, tried to create an anti-communist bastion in South Viet Nam under the mandarin government of Ngo Dinh Diem; when Kennedy increased our troop contingent from 800 advisers to 15,500 men; and finally when President Johnson extended the war to North Viet Nam and sent in an American Army now approaching half a million men. A series of steps, which in themselves seemed small at the time, have now led to an involvement from which there is no easy escape, and whose justifications have become so blurred by the accumulation of carnage and rhetoric that they are no longer fully convincing, or perhaps even comprehensible.

Although the roots of the American commitment to South Viet Nam are deep and tangled, they are centered, Schlesinger believes, in Eisenhower's 1954 decision to support the Saigon regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, and in the protocol of Dulles' SEATO treaty, which drew a line across Southeast Asia at the 17th parallel in Viet Nam. Although that line against communism could have been drawn elsewhere, it was

drawn in South Viet Nam, and "a vital American interest was thus created where none had existed before." From that self-assumed interest everything else followed step by step in this "tragedy without villains."

Yet if there are no villains, there are certainly actors in this tragedy—actors who at any point along the way could have made different choices, proposed different alternatives, held different assumptions. We did not become involved in Viet Nam by accident and we are not remaining there simply because we took a series of seemingly minor steps along the way. The war in Viet Nam did not happen to us; we chose to become involved in it. We did not, of course, choose to have it take on such enormous dimensions, nor involve us in actions which many Americans believe to be morally compromising. But this war resulted from decisions deliberately made and firmly carried out. President Eisenhower could not have imagined where his 1954 decision to support Diem would lead us, but today he fully supports the war and even refuses to rule out the use of atomic weapons. President Kennedy might not have expanded the war to the dimensions of another Korea, but it was he—on the advice of General Maxwell Taylor and Walt Rostow—who set the stage for the Americanization of the war by sending in an army of 15,000 men and launching counter-insurgency operations. Above all, President Johnson did not want to sacrifice the Great Society at home to the preservation of Marshal Ky's regime in Saigon. But he chose to do so, even though he could have reversed the tide set in motion by his predecessors and sought a Laos-type settlement for Viet Nam.

Having served as an adviser to President Kennedy, Mr. Schlesinger is particularly qualified to explain why the American troop contingent in South Viet Nam was expanded nearly 100-fold during Kennedy's Administration, why the decision was made to "sink

or swim with Diem," and why, in his words, "the projected American solution in 1961-1963 was increasingly framed in military terms." The reasons, according to Schlesinger, were that during those years Viet Nam seemed "far less urgent" than such places as Cuba or Berlin, and, perhaps more importantly, that U. S. policy appeared to be working. Virtually unconditional support of the Diem regime, combined with a contingent of military advisers who would train the Vietnamese in such recently-discovered American specialties as the art of guerrilla warfare, would presumably check the rot in South Viet Nam. From this policy flowed the "strategic hamlet" program, in which peasants were herded into fortified villages surrounded by barbed wire fences. That this failed to win their allegiance to the Saigon regime was apparently a surprise to no one but President Kennedy's advisers.

Perhaps Kennedy would not have taken such dubious advice had he not himself been infatuated with the idea of "counter-insurgency" warfare as a means of overcoming communist-inspired resistance groups in under-developed countries. What "massive retaliation" was to Dulles, "counter-insurgency" was to Kennedy. The only difference was that Dulles probably never meant it, whereas Kennedy did. Committed to the belief that the United States had an unspoken obligation to build viable nations out of the remnants of Europe's discarded empire, Kennedy saw South Viet Nam as a terrain on which communist guerrilla warfare would be challenged at its own level. What he never realized, or perhaps never had time fully to come to terms with, was that this was possible only in countries where the government had large-scale popular support. Otherwise, the only alternative to the insurgents would be an American Army—as President Johnson discovered when the Saigon government began to collapse by late 1964. It is no doubt true, as Schlesinger notes, that President Kennedy "had other matters on his mind" than the disintegrating situation in South Viet Nam. Unfortunately this is an inadequate explanation for faulty analysis and decisions wrongly made. It is to Mr. Schlesinger's credit that he does not try to exonerate his former chief. But in pointing out the dilemmas that Kennedy faced—inherited commitments, over-enthusiastic reports from the field, pressure from the military—he also makes us understand the even greater dilemmas facing President Johnson.

Mr. Schlesinger eloquently attacks the ostensible assumptions of the Administration's Viet Nam policy: that bombing can force the North to negotiate, that Hanoi holds the key to peace in the South, that China is really the instigator of the war, that the risk of Chinese or Soviet intervention is negligible, and that some kind of military "victory" is possible. Yet even though he declares there is "little reason to suppose that bombing will not continue to heighten Hanoi's resolve to fight on," he does not come out for a total halt to the bombings. Instead, he suggests we "taper off the bombing of the north as prudently as we can," and "oppose further widening of the war." This is no doubt less a contradiction in Mr. Schlesinger's analysis than it is an example of his circumspection, for in sticking to the "middle course" he is precluded from advocating any radical solutions.

Yet this circumspection has its drawbacks, and it is sometimes difficult to determine exactly what kind of solution Mr. Schlesinger really favors. He speaks approvingly, as do many Administration officials, of an independent and even neutral South Viet Nam. He goes a step further and suggests that this may also be an objective of the Viet Cong—and that therefore we should negotiate with them and accept their entry into a Saigon coalition government. At the same time, however, he also states that a (Continued on page 19)



Ronald Steel is the author of *The End of Alliance* (Viking), and a study of American interventionism, *Pax Americana*, to be published by Viking this spring.

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unified "communist Viet Nam under Ho might be a better instrument of containment [of China] than a shaky Saigon regime." Both of these judgments may well be true, but they are not complementary. Do we want an independent South Viet Nam pledged to neutralism, or do we want a unified communist Viet Nam under Ho Chi Minh as a barrier to Chinese expansion? Are we fighting for the independence of South Viet Nam or are we trying to contain China? Do we want to return to the Geneva Agreements (under which the partition of Viet Nam was supposed to be temporary), or should we, as Mr. Schlesinger suggests, try to exploit the tension between the Viet Cong and Hanoi, a tension which "could help protect the independence of a post-war South Viet Nam"?

The Administration has never answered this question satisfactorily, nor has Mr. Schlesinger really come to terms with it—although he seems to favor the creation of a civilian government in Saigon that will negotiate with the Viet Cong, and then an international agreement to neutralize South Viet Nam and perhaps to provide for a

referendum at some distant date to deal with the problem of reunification. Yet until we decide what it is we are trying to accomplish in Viet Nam, how are we going to know whether the stakes are worth it—or how to extricate ourselves?

While all good pragmatists will sympathize with Mr. Schlesinger's efforts to keep to the middle of the road, it is fair to wonder whether this will lead to a way out of Viet Nam. The policy he suggests does not really meet the objection of the hawks, who see a vital American interest in the preservation of an anti-communist regime in Saigon. Nor does it fully satisfy the doves, who believe we have no business trying to determine what kind of government rules South Viet Nam. Either we do or we don't, and if an intelligent policy is to be made, a stand has to be taken on this central issue. The trouble with Mr. Schlesinger's middle course is that it may skirt the real problem of what is our stake in Viet Nam. Choosing between extreme alternatives is rarely pleasant and most statesmen try to avoid it. Even de Gaulle, who now reminds us of France's magnanimity toward her former colonies, tried a whole bag full of compromises before he fi-

nally decided to end the war by turning Algeria over to the rebels.

Perhaps we may be approaching the point where we have to make a similar decision ourselves—a point where we must fish or cut bait: decide whether an anti-communist—or even neutral—South Viet Nam is vital to our interests or whether it isn't. If it is, then we must push on with the hawks and pursue this terrible war to its unforeseen, and perhaps unthinkable, conclusion. If it is not, then we may have to let the South Vietnamese settle their own affairs—even if this means a victory for the Viet Cong and the reunification of the country under Ho Chi Minh. In either case, the choice is not going to be a pretty one. Which is why, if there is ever to be a negotiated end to hostilities, we have to come to terms with the real alternatives.

*The Bitter Heritage* frames the issues with precision and analyzes our current policies with a relentless logic. If it offers no solutions, it is nonetheless an important contribution to the creation of an informed electorate that is necessary to face the hard choices of a tragedy from which there may be no middle way out. ❊