

Ups and downs of escalation

THE LIMITS OF INTERVENTION. By Townsend Hoopes. McKay, 245 pp. \$5.95.

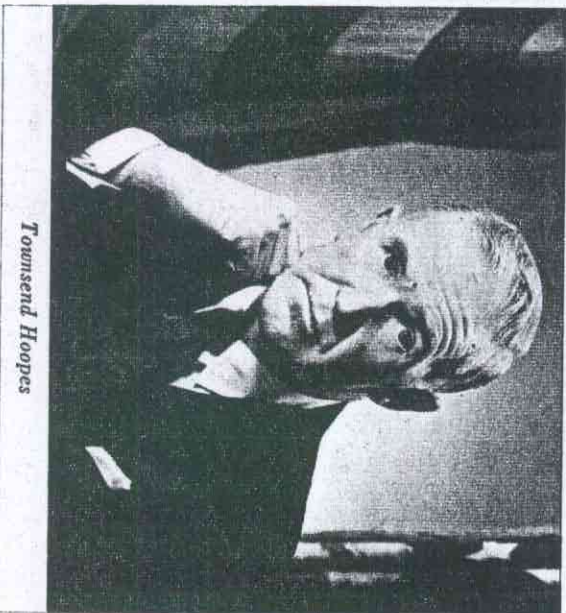
By Anthony Hartley

Townsend Hoopes's inside story of the Vietnam war as it developed during the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations, is, no doubt, the first of a long series of polemical memoirs, and a fascinating one. But its testimony will certainly be contradicted, and its judgments on individuals are a little too black and white to be true. In the Vietnam drama it is clear that, for Hoopes, L.B.J., Dean Rusk and Walt Rostow are the villains. In the center of the stage stands the Hamlet figure of Robert McNamara, the hesitant victim of his own competence. Up front shines the hero figure of Clark Clifford, while, in the background the elder statesmen of American foreign policy alternately applaud and lament. It was their doyen, Dean Acheson, who first brought doubt into the mind of President Johnson by the simple statement: "The Joint Chiefs of Staff don't know what they're talking about."

History will modify this picture, but Hoopes, who was first Deputy Assistant Secretary for Defense and then, from 1967, Under-Secretary for the Air Force, is an important witness. He can write, too, and some of his vignettes (e.g., McNamara and the President stuck in the Pentagon elevator on the day of the former's retirement) will reappear in the history books.

Basically, this is a tale of military defeat. Hoopes, in his Pentagon niche, was one of the few civilian officials to contest the euphoria of the military command in

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Townsend Hoopes

Saigon. His memoranda on the failure of the bombing of North Vietnam to stem infiltration into the South are the best explanation yet given of precisely why the policy of escalation did not succeed. But he and his like could not influence events until after the Tet offensive and the arrival of the new Secretary for Defense, Clark Clifford — a man who had the President's ear and was in a peculiarly strong political position. After that, during March 1968, things moved rapidly towards the Paris talks and Johnson's decision not to run again.

In dealing with the Kennedy Administration Hoopes renders a considerable service to history by emphasizing the continuity between its policies and those of its successor. For it is now beginning to be evident that

American involvement in Vietnam was largely a result of the concern with counterinsurgency that ruled the day in Washington. Hoopes himself was attracted by the low-cost counterinsurgency strategy which even now he believes "might conceivably succeed." Once you had interest in counterinsurgency, it was inevitable that South Vietnam should seem a suitable place for field experiments. The point of no return in political terms was reached with the overthrow of Diem. Since the United States had encouraged this revolution, it had to assume responsibility for the regimes that followed.

The view from the Pentagon during these years was, of course, limited. Hoopes's general narrative of the war is badly flawed by his inability to sort out Vietnamese politics. His judgment that "national aspiration was the historical imperative that explained Ho Chi Minh" is as question-begging as earlier judgments about Mao. Besides, it ignores the fact that Diem was every bit as much a Vietnamese nationalist as Ho. Perhaps it is the impatience of the military technocrat with such political details that leads him to be rather cold-blooded about the possible fate of the South Vietnamese. "There is no doubt that such a United States policy of withdrawal will be extremely painful for several strata of South Vietnamese. . . ." Quite, but this is the same language used to gloss over unpleasant reality that Hoopes deplored in the Johnson Administration. And the same might be said of his belief that the "adverse consequences" of American withdrawal from Vietnam can be mitigated by "adjustments, reassurances, and perhaps added U.S. effort in places like Thailand, Korea and Japan." In its own way this book also demonstrates the disastrous lack of political understanding which has haunted American policy in Southeast Asia. *