

Insight and Outlook . . .

Texas Politics and Escalation

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"I don't see any other alternative," the President said of his latest decision to intensify the war. And there lies the precise measure of the failure of his Vietnamese policy.

For he has repeatedly come up to critical junctures with no alternative in sight but raising the level of violence. And it is the constancy of this pattern, it is the unbroken record of upward progression in the fighting that raises among serious people fears of a wider war and doubts of the President's ability to end the conflict.



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The real question, accordingly, is not what happened in the past fortnight in Washington, London, Moscow and Hanoi. The more so as the chief actor, Prime Minister Harold Wilson of Britain, grossly exaggerated the significance of his meeting with Premier Alexei Kosygin of Russia, and the smoothness of his liaison with Washington, and the weight Moscow carries in Hanoi.

The real question is why it is that the President, time after time, can see no alternative to escalation. And the answer, I think, lies in a personal political instinct bred in his native state.

The chief feature of Texas politics is that for decades a state with all the ingredients of a two-party system remained a one-party state. Under that condition, Lyndon Johnson did not learn the politics of rallying majorities. He learned the politics of confusing, dividing and routing the opposition.

NOWHERE HAS this art been shown to better advantage than in the Vietnamese war. The President has occupied central ground

between the conservatives in both parties who would like to end the war with a bang and the liberals who favor more strenuous efforts to engage the other side in negotiations. To a remarkable extent he has kept both groups of critics off balance and immobilized.

He has kept the conservatives immobilized by denying them the support they need to make a strong public impression—the support of the military professionals. The President has bound the military chiefs to his side by underlining the primacy of their needs, and by occasionally yielding — and constantly holding open the

possibility that he might yield still further — to their demands for greater military pressure.

As to the liberals, they have been kept off balance by the threat of jingoistic assault. In the coarsest way, the President has let it be known that he was prepared to charge them, or have others charge them, with

selling out our men in the field. That is why Sen. Robert Kennedy, Sen. William Fulbright and others are so angry at the President.

But if these tactics have been successful in restraining the opposition, they have not been without a price. To a large extent, the President has become the political prisoner of his military advisers. Any break with them would cost him the rod he uses to discipline his civilian critics.

That is why the President is not in a position to insulate himself against the military pressures for escalation. That is why he has not been able to expose to the public the limitations of what can be gained from military pressure. That is why he repeatedly finds himself with no alternatives but escalation.

THE MOST RECENT increase in the level of violence is only another case in point. The decisive fact is that as soon as the Tet truce started last month, the military came running to the White House with pictures of supplies being sent to South Vietnam by ship and truck. They demanded anew the right to increase the action against the North.

In these circumstances, it was impossible for the President simply to sit and wait, or to renew the bombing at a lower level than before—two alternatives that made good sense. In order to prevent a break with the military, he needed rapid progress toward peace. Thus when the London meetings did not bring quick results, the President acceded to the pressure of escalation. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Vice President Hubert Humphrey thereupon swung into line, with reasons that made all this jockeying seem to be part of a deliberate plan.

To be sure, the most recent expansion of the war is not very great. But the real issue is the issue of political pattern, not of military degree. What is truly troublesome is the inability of the President to disentangle himself from the forces that make it impossible for him to reach a settlement.