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Loose Talk

They say that President Truman, by nature, never looked back, that President Eisenhower had a Supreme Commander's confidence in the staff system which shaped his decisions, that President Kennedy never lost his New England cool. President Johnson is another breed, and, with him, the agonizing process of decision-making uncorks another chemistry. In the process he turns inward, uncommunicative, often irritable; he listens hard. But once decided, he comes on loud and strong, with the restless raw power of the Southwest, which is his strength, to overwhelm his critics and create consensus around his policy. So it was right after the Dominican troop landings, when his outpouring of off-the-cuff argumentation only served to overstate—if not misstate—a case that would have been better served by silence or a more carefully measured defense.

The same, and hopefully no more, may be said of a recent presidential outburst, after the collapse of last month's Vietnam peace probing and the consequent decision to tighten the military pressure on Hanoi. "I think the American people should know that this is a question between their

President, their country, their troops and Mr. Ho Chi Minh and the troops that he is sending in from the North," the President declared at an impromptu press conference. "Everyone can take whatever side of the matter that he wants."

Accepted on its face, it is hard to imagine a more dangerous oversimplification of a problem so essentially delicate and complex. With the last sentence, the President swept all the war's critics into the enemy camp. With the first sentence, he threw into question almost everything the United States Government has said on the subject over the years—that this is, at bottom, a Vietnamese affair, that we are only there to help, that the ultimate test will come in the struggle for the allegiance of the people in the South, that we have allies, in Korea and Australia and elsewhere and that the point of last year's Manila summit meeting was to give them a collective voice. To set the matter up as no more than a personal vendetta between Lyndon Johnson and Ho Chi Minh, or as a war between Hanoi and Washington, would be to dig this country into a conflict it could win only by the destruction of North Vietnam.

The President and his advisers regularly complain, in private, that hard-line sentiment is more of a problem in policy-making on Vietnam than pressure from the peace bloc. If so, it ought not to be recklessly inflamed. The best that can be said about this sort of loose talk is that the President was not defining policy, but campaigning in his own irrepressible style for policy which he has himself defined elsewhere with more commendable precision in the past.