

Honest Abe and the LBJ Loyalty Test

Today has been proclaimed by President Johnson as "Loyalty Day," but it is doubtful that another President, Abraham Lincoln, could have met the loyalty test laid down by Johnson in making the proclamation.

Loyalty Day, the President says, is a good time for Americans to show their support of Vietnam so "the world will not mistake the clamor of dissenting activists for the true voice of the nation."

In case anybody missed the point, Gen. Westmoreland, the commander in Vietnam, spent the last week in the United States emphasizing the administration's charge that critics of the war are giving aid and comfort to the enemy and prolonging the fighting.

In denouncing the Mexican War, Lincoln said, "I cannot be silent. . . . The war was unnecessarily commenced by the President. . . . As to the mode of terminating the war and securing peace, the President is equally wandering and indefinite. . . . All this shows that the President is in no way satisfied with his own position. . . . His mind, taxed beyond his power, running hither and thither, finding no position on which it can settle down. . . ."

It sounds as if it were spoken only a minute ago, except today not even Sen. Fulbright would probably

speak so caustically of the President. But when Lincoln was in Congress, criticism was not necessarily considered un-American and unpatriotic. Still, let us admit it, Johnson is not the first chief executive, including Lincoln, to resent his critics. To a greater or lesser degree, all Presidents praise free speech—as long as they are the beneficiaries of it. Like his predecessors, Johnson supports the principle of dissent; he is only against the exercise of it. By others.

Wouldn't it be refreshing if just one President just once inverted Voltaire and frankly said to his tormentors, "I disapprove of what you say, and I intend to do all in my power to keep you from saying it."

That, of course, is what Johnson is now trying to do. He has, in fact, been trying to do it right along, but all the stops are now clearly out. That's why Westmoreland was called in. It wasn't subtle; but it was effective, at least up to a point.

Johnson already had a mighty chorus hymning Vietnam for him: The entire cabinet, the joint chiefs of staff, many of the leaders in the Senate and House, most of the Republican spokesmen, and most of the press. It is enough to drown out almost any opposition.

Why then was it necessary for the first time in U.S. history, to bring the field commander back from the front at the height of the war to lobby for the administration's policy and to admonish its critics?

The obvious calculation is that the politicians would think twice before challenging a war hero as sharply as they would the press or other civilian spokesmen for the administration. A few hardy souls have answered the general, but not many.

We are told that the Vietnam critics encourage the enemy to believe the American people are divided on the war, and that this prolongs it. The implication is that if everybody shuts up and backs the President no matter what he does, the enemy will become discouraged and quit. It is hardly that simple. The enemy thinks the American people are divided because they are divided. Even if all the critics were silenced, Hanoi could still read the public opinion polls, unless they also are going to be suppressed.

In any case, the Gallop Poll is published all over the world, and the latest one reported that, "approval of Mr. Johnson's handling of Vietnam is at an all-time low (only 37 percent approved). The evidence suggests that nothing short of peace negotiations is likely to be interpreted as success by the man in the street."

Those cold, disinterested figures are more likely to impress Hanoi (as well as Peking and Moscow) than any number of congressional speeches or campus demonstrations. It is also possible that Hanoi, noting the administration's inflexible frame of mind, may remember another thought of Voltaire's: "Optimism is the madness of maintaining that everything is right when it is wrong."