

Washington: The Voices of the Silent Majority

By JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON—The efforts of the President and the Vice President to arouse support for the Administration's Vietnam policy and discredit the critics of that policy have produced a remarkable response from the people. In fact, the public reaction may very well be more violent, and even vicious, than the Administration intended.

It is hard to generalize about public opinion from letters coming into newspapers or TV networks in this part of the country, but the letters coming into the New York Times are overwhelmingly favorable to Mr. Nixon and Mr. Agnew and sharply, even savagely, critical of the press and networks.

The Wide Indictment

Most of these letter writers are saying that they are with the President and Vice President, and they are charging the press and networks with embarrassing the Administration and helping the enemy. But quite a few of them go beyond this into a general indictment of reporters and commentators—often lumped together as if their assignments were the same—for "stirring up trouble" among the poor, the blacks, and the rebellious young on the university campuses.

Many of these letters come from obviously sincere people who are troubled by the turmoil of the time—by the war, the uproar in the cities, and the colleges; by the cost of living, the inflation, the alarming incidence of drug addiction, and the decline of authority in the family, the schools, and the churches.

What is clear from many of these private correspondents, however, is that press and television, particularly the "liberal" commentators of the East, are being blamed for supporting the social revolution of the last two generations, for backing the growth of the welfare state, for dramatizing the plight of the Negroes, and for prolonging the war they have sought to end.

In short, the press is now being charged by the conservatives for advocating the turmoil it is reporting—which sometimes it does and sometimes it doesn't—and the paradox of this is that the press is also being attacked almost as violently by the militant radicals of the left for being an instrument of "the establishment" and the *status quo*.

It is not hard to understand why the President authorized this campaign against his critics on the war. They were dominating the comment on Viet-

nam and no doubt giving the impression, which was probably never true, that they represented the feelings of most of the American people.

Energizing Supporters

When Mr. Nixon speeded up the process of withdrawal from Vietnam and changed the battlefield orders to minimize the casualties and the search-and-destroy tactics, he thought he would get support from his critics in the East, but he got very little. Accordingly he set out to energize his natural supporters in the middle and on the right. One doubts that he intended to arouse the old backlash extremists on the right, but with the help of the Vice President, he has apparently done so.

For the appeal against the "Eastern" snobs has not only aroused support for his Vietnam policy, but revived the always latent anti-New York feelings in the country, and this in turn has produced some ugly anti-Negro and anti-Semitic, and anti-Communist reactions which neither Mr. Nixon nor Mr. Agnew could have intended.

This is not a major theme in the letters coming into this office, but it is clearly an element in the controversy. Critics of the war are addressed as

"Communists" who are helping Hanoi, the blacks, the unions, the young, and "all the other troublemakers."

It is not only that we are "unfair" and "inaccurate"—as God knows we sometimes are—but that we are "subversives." A column that supports a reader's opinion is usually characterized as "objective" and "fair," while one that disagrees is "subjective," "opinionated," and even pro-Communist.

Typical of the extreme comments from the right is one from a reader in Texas: "You are the clique that are polarizing the country. The typical Communist reverse psychology doesn't work with those of us who work for a living. Keep trying there in the slums. You made them, and buddy, you keep telling them I'm going to pay for them. Just keep it up. They believe you? Regards to the rest of the Jewish businessmen."

Nevertheless, the Administration has clearly mobilized a lot of support that is now attacking its critics. The President's popularity has soared in the polls since the counterattack started, and now all he has to prove is his assertion that this support can really help him end the war.