

# REVIEW *and* OUTLOOK

## The Vietnam Suspicions

One of the more disturbing effects of the Vietnam war has been its exposure of a tendency to delusion in high places.

Against commonly available wisdom, some of the most powerful men in America in the past decade were able to convince themselves that a modern technological army could be effective in guerrilla war in an underdeveloped country, that the attempt to protect unclear U.S. interests in Indochina were worth horrendous and irrecoverable costs to the U.S., and most important of all, perhaps, that Americans could predict and control events actually beyond all influence and even, sometimes, understanding.

Much of this delusion, we are persuaded, has been brought under control with the Nixon Administration; at the same time, a disturbing legacy of deep popular suspicion remains. With events in Cambodia and Laos beginning to press new dilemmas on President Nixon, we are bothered to think that though he does seem to perceive the need to avoid delusion, he may not be paying as much attention to the problem of suspicion as it deserves.

Surely the suspicion that top level policymakers may not be in touch with the realities of the Indochina situation remains a powerful factor in popular attitudes towards the war. It is true, of course, that the President's initiation of the troop withdrawals last year and his later appeals to the silent majority had the effect of quieting much of the public criticism of the war. But this dramatic result should not be allowed to conceal the depth of the underlying mistrust.

The politically powerful misgivings over Washington's ability to extricate the U.S. from the war continues to be evident in, among other things, the extraordinary move of the Massachusetts legislature to challenge the Constitutionality of the war. The suspicions are also reflected in public opinion polls which recently have shown an ominous shift towards immediate withdrawal despite the seeming soundness and responsibility of the President's Vietnamization policy.

Indeed, if the course he has chosen has succeeded in winning him some support and a period of tranquility at home, Mr. Nixon remains highly vulnerable. He dare not let the public think he has rekindled a long-term U.S. commitment to defend South Vietnam—even if measures which create such an impression also seem in all rationality the only alternative to a Vietnam disaster. To do so would awaken the panicky suspicions that he has fallen,

like his predecessor, into the old delusions. If that should happen again on a wide scale, the personal political price Mr. Nixon himself will pay may only be exceeded by the agonies which will befall an America already deeply troubled by a widespread sense of lost confidence in Government. This might well happen even if the decisions involved prove ultimately advantageous to the traditional policy goals in South Vietnam.

Typically, the current events in Indochina are ambiguous enough to feed a certain amount of optimism. Some analysts, for example, see a potential advantage to the U.S. in the rise of Cambodian generals more anti-Communist than Sihanouk; and the stepped-up North Vietnamese action in Laos, they say, may reflect a greater than expected success of the Vietnamization program in South Vietnam.

And yet, unfair as it may be, the present mood of the public and the nation's vulnerability to it mean that the President simply is not as free as he once might have been to experiment with these changes or even to stand pat and wait for their possible benefits to develop.

Do those who have a voice in Vietnam policy fully understand this? Secretary of State Rogers' reported testimony to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that the Administration plans to keep the lowest of profiles in Cambodia was a reassuring move. On the other hand, the President's explanation of our involvement in Laos had a less credible ring, and the suspicions were hardly eased by the later exposure of embarrassing errors in it.

Senator Fulbright, who has in the past been moved by displays of Administration candor, was not reassured enough by Secretary Rogers' secret testimony to cancel a speech fearful of disaster from continuation of the policy of Vietnamization. And though continuation of troop withdrawals at the present rate or better might end the suspicions once and for all, high level military men are reported pressing for a slowdown.

Right now, these may seem insubstantial reasons for worry. Yet, perhaps because we are touched by a bit of the Vietnam suspicions ourselves, we cannot ignore them easily. For we find it hard to escape the feeling that the President may soon face the still mercifully postponed choice between humiliating disaster abroad and new and surpassing domestic trauma. If he does not fully weigh the power of the popular suspicions in his thinking now, his capacity to handle that future agony is not comfortable to ponder.