

# The Personal Touch

By **GEORGE E. REEDY**

WASHINGTON—Whatever may be the value of the Pentagon Papers to historians, they offer to the political philosopher an invaluable insight into the essentially personal character of our Government and its tendency to insulate the American people from the hard debates from which vital policies flow.

I am not overly impressed by the information which has been revealed and I have a strong feeling that many writers will regret the hasty conclusions they have adopted as to the origins of the war in Vietnam.

But there is one conclusion which can be reached with confidence. It is that in 1964 and 1965 the inner circles of our Government were locked in raging debate and only faint echoes reached out to the American people who had the most at stake in the outcome. The public's business—at the highest level of life and death—was being determined as though it were none of the public's business.

If this were merely a temporary aberration in the workings of our Government, it would be cause for alarm. Unfortunately, it is much more than that. It is a result of the political system itself. We can survive leadership that makes mistakes, even when the errors border on the catastrophic. But there is real question whether democracy can survive procedures which exclude the people from decisions.

The salient point is that the entire debate of 1964 and 1965 was staged behind closed doors for the benefit of one man—the only man who had the power to make a decision. And it was understood by all participants that once that man had reached a decision the best face possible would be put on it so it could be presented to the American people.

Even granting the best of intentions, this is a method of policy making which has grave defects. It not only limits pre-policy debate to the Government, it also limits the meaningful discussion to small and highly selected circles within the Government itself. Furthermore, those circles become even smaller in inverse ratio to the importance of the issue.

This places an impossible burden upon men who are dissenting from the apparent trend of the President's views. They must wage most of their struggle through memoranda and only a tiny handful can have any certainty that their thoughts are penetrating to the sacrosanct oval office. They do not know what other views are being urged and what arguments can be countered. They have no opportunity

to weigh the President's psychological reactions.

Of course, there are supposed to be Government structures which guarantee some adversary debate. But such structures are merely forms which serve the President's will. The National Security Council is supposedly such a structure and yet Hubert H. Humphrey, who by law was a member, never even saw the documents in question. This is hardly surprising. Most of the members of the White House staff, including myself, were unaware of their existence or the full dimensions of the passionate discussion under way.

The ultimate reality is that in such matters, there is no compulsion upon the President to take into account any views except those he selects.

The American system provides no procedure for adversary political debate in determining policy. The men and women who have the necessary information for such debate are agents of the President himself and have no political base upon which to stand. The Congress has the political base but does not have the information.

Furthermore, there is an American tradition which inhibits even thinking through the possibilities of establishing an adversary system. It is expressed in such clichés as "Committees cannot fight battles."

Once a nation has committed itself to war, it is necessary to place power in the hands of one man—not because that is a desirable way to conduct human affairs but because there is no alternative. But the issue that was fought out—in isolation from the public—in 1964 and 1965 was not how to conduct a war but whether a war should be conducted.

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**TOP SECRET**

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