

By RUSSELL BAKER

WASHINGTON, May 6—It was April, 1954, when Richard Nixon, then Vice President of the United States, first made news by suggesting that Americans make war in Indochina.

"If in order to avoid further Communist expansion in Asia and particularly in Indochina, if in order to avoid it we must take the risk by putting American boys in, I believe that the executive branch of the Government has to take the politically unpopular position of facing up to it and doing it, and I personally would support such a decision," he told a convention of newspaper editors that spring.

The uproar created by these comments was quickly squelched; President Eisenhower made it clear he would not take up the Frenchman's burden in Southeast Asia, Dienbienphu fell, Vietnam was partitioned North and South, and America droned peacefully on into the warm, comfortable depths of the Eisenhower years.

#### Still With Indochina

Now, sixteen years later—seven years of Eisenhower, three years of Kennedy, five

years of Johnson, one year and three months of Nixon later—Mr. Nixon is still engaged with Indochina and once again reminding us of the political danger he faces by doing whatever he does when he ties our armies down there.

The interesting point, however, has to do with the student malcontents who are carrying on so vigorously against Mr. Nixon's latest intervention. Most of them would have been only three, four, five years old when Mr. Nixon first spoke of this matter.

#### No End in Sight

Between Mr. Nixon's first bellicose utterance and his latest, a whole lifetime has gone by for most people now on campus.

This may be a key to understanding the depth of the rage which so many express toward Mr. Nixon's policy. A whole lifetime of engagement with Indochina. And no end in sight. And nothing that anyone can do. No election, no Congressional fulmination, no change of President, from Eisenhower, to Kennedy, to Johnson, to Nixon, serves to remove this dreary, meaningless, other-side-of-the-world, death-promising

Indochina from American man's fate.

To the young it must seem that it has already lasted forever, like the war in 1984; indeed, it may prove to be the war Orwell foresaw in 1984—that endless war the politicians invoked from time to time to justify the ruling tyranny.

In 1984, of course, there was doubt whether the war actually existed; in Vietnam there is no doubt that people die in violence but there is great doubt whether ideologies—Communism, "free world"—are at war there, as our politicians insist, or whether we are merely caught in some kind of Asiatic con game, as brutal and as pointless as Chicago politics.

Whatever the fact about the war, a person of college age today finds it possible to view his entire lifetime as a period bracketed by Mr. Nixon's declarations of willingness to accept "the risk of putting American boys in."

An unpleasantness one has had with him an entire lifetime will probably come to be regarded as a curse. If the old men who run Congress and were children during the Spanish-American War still had to

read about casualties on San Juan Hill every time the newspaper arrived, they would doubtless think, too, that somebody in the Government ought to have his policy examined. A few might be tempted to blow up the R.O.T.C. building.

#### A Seeming Curse

Even the most ardent supporters of the President's position on the Spanish-American War (the members of the House Armed Services Committee) would be willing to concede that the war had become a curse. The more sensible might conclude with good reason that a war that had lasted more than seventy years—a committee chairman's entire lifetime—would probably last forever.

This is the way the Vietnam war must seem to the students. A lifetime long and likely to last forever. A curse. And no one with power to make the Government have its policy examined. Just one more President with the courage to take the same politically unpopular position all those other Presidents have had the courage to take ever since today's bums were nothing but the hope of the future sitting in sandboxes a lifetime ago.