

L. B. J. and the Commitment Myth

By ERNEST GRUENING

WASHINGTON—There are myths on which the Pentagon Papers shed no light that need to be dispelled since they were important factors in mobilizing public opinion in support of our war policy. The principal myth is that the United States had commitments to intervene militarily in Vietnam.

President Johnson projected this belief in his 1965 State of the Union Message, saying:

"Why are we there?

"We are there, first, because a friendly nation has asked us to help against Communist aggression. Ten years ago the President pledged our help. Three Presidents have supported that pledge. And we will not break it now."

These allegations were unfounded. The record is bare of any such request. The only request that Ngo Dinh Diem made of President Eisenhower was to help move refugees from North Vietnam to South Vietnam. The record is clear that President Eisenhower proffered help to Diem, but only economic help, and that proffer was qualified by conditions of good performance and reforms which were never fulfilled. Similarly, no such request was made of President Kennedy although he took it upon himself to send some 16,000 "advisers" to South Vietnam. In saying that three Presidents had supported that pledge, President Johnson included himself.

He elaborated on this statement in an address at Johns Hopkins on April 7, 1965, saying:

"We are there because we have a promise to keep. Since 1954 every American President has offered support to the people of South Vietnam. Thus, over many years, we have made a national pledge to help South Vietnam retain its independence. I intend to keep that promise. To dishonor that

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pledge would be an unforgivable wrong."

Thus a myth was projected and perpetuated that the United States had made a commitment to send military aid to Vietnam.

In March 1966, the Southeast Asia Collective Treaty was substituted by the State Department as justification for our course. Article 4 of the treaty, —the pertinent article—provided that if there were aggression against any of the concerned countries all should consult immediately in order to agree on the measures to be taken for the common defense, and that any action had to be in accord with each nation's constitutional processes. There never was any consultation, and action by the United States in accord with our constitutional processes would have required, under Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution, a declaration of war by the Congress.

Actually the United States was, by its military action, in violation of the

treaty in several other respects, since the treaty incorporated the provision of the United Nations Charter, of which we were a signatory, "to settle disputes by peaceful means and refrain from the use of force." Moreover, the United States had not, as the treaty provided, consulted with other signatories before acting; had not reported its action to the Security

Council of the United Nations, and, as stated, had used force, which the treaty forbade.

In other words, the treaty gave us no authority whatever to do what we did—to invade Vietnam. Yet this treaty was repeatedly cited in the Administration's propaganda as a justification for our military invasion.

The fact is that the only commit-

ments in regard to our course in Southeast Asia were made by Lyndon Johnson, campaigning for the Presidency in 1964, when he promised not once but repeatedly, that he would not send American boys to fight a ground war on the continent of Asia.

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