

[Comment]

Beyond the Pentagon Papers

“The Vietnam experience shows the deliberateness with which Presidents, advisers, and bureaucracies . . . excluded disengagement as a feasible alternative.”

HOW COULD IT HAPPEN IN Vietnam that a “small” commitment in the mid-1950s became a massive one in the mid-1960s? Several former administration “insiders” have recently stepped forward, encouraged by Daniel Ellsberg’s release of the Pentagon Papers to provide answers. Beginning in the Eisenhower years, we are told by George Ball, a series of “small steps” were taken “almost absentmindedly” until the United States found itself “absorbed” into Vietnam. It was “the politics of inadvertence,” Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., has written in evident agreement with

Ball. Yet the basic policies and concepts were right, says Roger Hilsman; the American failure was a failure of implementation, a case of inept execution. Quite the contrary, Leslie H. Gelb has argued in a recent *New York Review of Books* article: the decision-making system worked as its participants intended it to work, on the basis of a misguided consensus about the international and domestic political dangers of failing in Vietnam. Ellsberg, while supporting much of Gelb’s analysis, has added his own dimension to the discussion, arguing that Presidential concern about future elections and the threat of a right-wing reaction to withdrawal short of victory was the first “rule” of policymaking on Vietnam.

The Pentagon Papers tell me that all of these explanations are misleading or inadequate. Choices to escalate rather than de-escalate or disengage were made deliberately, not haphazardly; policies were not merely implemented poorly, they were ill-conceived; concern over elections explains why changes in policy may have been postponed rather than why they resulted in continued or increased involvement. If the “system” as a whole worked so perversely well, it was because there was (and is) in American decision-makers and decisionmaking a disposition to respond to failure in ways that will perpetuate the “success” of America’s mission abroad. The decisions that were taken on Vietnam—always to press ahead with the war, usually to expand it—reflected much more than calculations about the domestic and international repercussions. They were manifestations of deeper drives to preserve and expand personal, institutional and national power.

The most fateful decisions on Vietnam—those that enmeshed the United States ever more deeply and dramatically enlarged the perceived “stakes” in the outcome of the war—occurred during the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations. What motivated these two Presidents and their common cast of senior policy advisers to make these decisions?

In the first place, they shared a number of bedrock assumptions about American responsibility for maintaining the global status quo before the

challenge of communist-supported revolutions: thus the critical nature of the Vietnam experience for the United States and the “Free World,” and the psycho-political importance of being firm in the face of the adversary’s “provocations.” One need not search between the lines for these assumptions; they emerge clearly from numerous documents and statements. The same John F. Kennedy who in June 1956 had spoken of Vietnam as “the cornerstone of the Free World in Southeast Asia, the keystone to the arch, the finger in the dike” also said as President seven years later: “We are not going to withdraw. In my opinion, for us to withdraw from that effort would mean a collapse not only of South Vietnam but Southeast Asia. So we are going to stay there.” Those who theorize that Kennedy was on the verge of disengagement before his assassination and cite televised remarks of September 2, 1963—“In the final analysis it is their war” and “they have to win it”—ignore the essential point: Kennedy, as he demonstrated in throwing support to the anti-Diem generals, wanted this war won whatever the deficiencies of, and obstacles posed by, Saigon politics. “Strongly in our mind,” he said in a less-quoted response on NBC television (September 9), “is what happened in the case of China at the end of World War II, where China was lost, a weak government became increasingly unable to control events. We don’t want that.” Kennedy would not “lose” South Vietnam, a determination that every South Vietnamese government then and since has learned how to exploit for accumulating aid without implementing reforms.

Well before the Tonkin Gulf incidents, it was recognized that increasing American involvement was contributing to the perceived value of South Vietnam, both for foreign and domestic policy. But this only lent greater validity to the “test case” hypothesis, according to McNamara (in a trip report to Johnson, March 16, 1964). The entire world, he wrote, regards the “South Vietnam conflict . . . as a test case of US capacity to help a nation meet a communist ‘war of liberation.’”

(Continued on Page 59)

by Melvin Gurtov

necessary he will take the case to the Supreme Court, he has not yet even been able to get the case out of the county. And the chance of Texas Gas Transmission Corporation being busted in Muhlenburg County is zero.

Speaking of the dangerous precedent that has now been set, Baker says, "If this is left to stand, the right to ownership is badly impaired. I hate to think where the individual stands if the corporation wants it [producing gas or oil field]. I just wonder what rights individuals have, if they have any."

—A. PATRICK SCHNEIDER II,
GENE L. MASON AND
THOMAS J. LANGAN

PENTAGON PAPERS (From Page 49)

Given the need to succeed, all that remained to be determined was how much will, resourcefulness, and perseverance the American leadership could muster in pursuit of its objectives. As phrased by Walt Rostow in a memorandum to Dean Rusk (November 23, 1964), victory was assured "if we enter the exercise with the same determination and staying power that we entered the long test on Berlin and the short test on the Cuba missiles. But it will take that kind of Presidential commitment and staying power." For Rostow as for others, Vietnam represented yet another probe of American power by the communist bloc; to blunt the probe meant acceptance of "the simple fact that at this stage of history we are the greatest power in the world—if we behave like it." Vietnam was thus also a test of the opposing wills, commitments, and abilities of great powers to exert influence in small countries. Disengagement in the midst of such a test was not only undesirable; it was unthinkable.

VIETNAM ALSO BECAME A personal test for Presidents. Policy suffered from pride of authorship as each President approved courses of action that made the war peculiarly his own. Success or failure became identified with his personal credibility, authority, and place in history—and those in his inner circle either learned to share in the burden or, as Chester

Cooper has commented, were excluded from "the team" and kept in the dark about sensitive information.

For President Kennedy, the fall of 1963 seems to have been the beginning of his personal identification with winning in Vietnam. As he said at a news conference on September 12, "What helps to win the war, we support; what interferes with the war effort, we oppose. In some ways I think the Vietnamese people and ourselves agree: we want the war to be won, the Communists to be contained, and the Americans to go home. . . . But [!] we are not there to see a war lost, and we will follow the policy which I have indicated today of advancing those causes and issues which help to win the war." If the Bay of Pigs disaster had encouraged him to compensate with strong action in Vietnam in 1961, the Cuban missile crisis in 1962 may have emboldened him to support Diem's overthrow and thus fully restore his credentials as a decisive President.

Lyndon Johnson adopted Kennedy's belief that Southeast Asia should not be "lost" the way China had been. (As

quoted by Tom Wicker, Johnson said in November 1963: "I am not going to be the President who saw Southeast Asia go the way China went.") By 1965, he was reported to have declared: "I do not want to be the first American President to lose a war." Like Kennedy, Johnson prided himself on his toughness and adroitness at manipulating power to assure America's dominant role in the Pacific. He accepted the challenge put before him by advisers such as Walt Rostow that, where there is "Presidential commitment and staying power," the United States can be equal to any task. Neither President could see himself shrinking from a challenge so phrased.

As deployments to Vietnam increased, the official rhetoric to rationalize them and internationalize their significance also expanded. Even before the start of the bombing campaign against the North, the war had become "our" war. The sense of commitment and need to win thereby heightened. As William Bundy, the Assistant Secretary of State, wrote to Rusk on January 6, 1965, the main concern of policy should be the "humiliating de-

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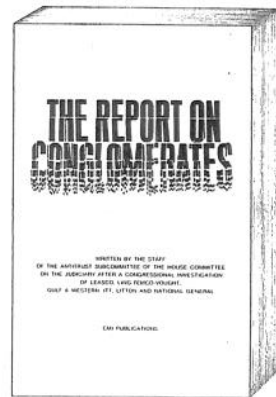
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feat" the United States would suffer if it continued to present a weak posture in Vietnam. Since we *had* become heavily involved, our image—America's "face"—had to be salvaged. "It is essential . . . that the US emerge as a 'good doctor,'" wrote John T. McNaughton, McNamara's principal aide. "We must have kept promises, been tough, taken risks, gotten bloodied, and hurt the enemy very badly."

For McNaughton, who was later, along with his boss, to become disenchanted with Administration policy, "70 percent of American objectives involved avoiding a humiliating US defeat." Joseph Kraft has since written that McNaughton was actually trying to communicate to the President, in language he would understand, how unimportant ("20 percent") South Vietnam's survival had become. If so, McNaughton misread the temper of his superiors. Neither the President nor his top advisers were likely to be attracted to disengagement because of the 20 percent figure; the avoidance of an American defeat *was* an objective they considered worth a substantial price. You don't tuck tail and run,

as Johnson and Rusk liked to say.

The negative objective of avoiding defeat had such a powerful effect on high-level policymakers by the mid-'60s that it was able to overwhelm the few policy dissenters in the Administration. Under Secretary of State George Ball, for instance, wrote in 1968 (in *The Discipline of Power*) that the United States had committed too much prestige, "authority," and resources in Vietnam to warrant disengaging short of success. As a Great Power, the United States must finish what she starts: "we have signed up for the duration." The Pentagon Papers show Ball as an early critic of policy; but his book indicates that he had gotten trapped by the convoluted logic of his colleagues into believing that the maintenance of a tragic and erroneous course in Vietnam was preferable to the "extreme" alternatives of withdrawal or "major escalation."

The prolongation and expansion of America's intervention in Vietnam were thus cemented by an unpierceable rationale. For the ideologists, American "interests" compelled commitments; for the others, including

Ball, who recognized failure but insisted on experimenting with new tactics to reverse it, commitments compelled interests. Either way, disengagement was not and could not be palatable.

IDEOLOGY AND ASSUMED OBLIGATIONS of power provided the framework for decisions that entrapped the United States in war and kept it there. But a number of bureaucratic pressures contributed significantly to those decisions—by creating demands for action, by biasing the choices available to the President, by instilling an urge to act tough, and by co-opting the dissenters. In explaining these pressures, some former officials have referred to executive fatigue, bureaucratic secrecy on Vietnam affairs, poor staffing, and duplication of effort. These, however, were only surface manifestations of much deeper institutional problems; they were symptoms of a "disease" indigenous to the decisionmaking process.

In the face of failing policies, bureaucratic leaders make constant demands upon their staffs to come up with "something new." That is their job, and it is performed zealously when personal and bureaucratic reputations are on the line. The demands multiply by the time they reach the President, and the pressure on him to respond with new action directives is intense. In the case of Vietnam, the President's response had to take account of conflicting interests. On one hand, Kennedy and Johnson, no less than some of their advisers, were anxious to avoid precipitate moves that would arouse public opinion, offend allies, and stimulate countermoves by North Vietnam and her allies. On the other, since Vietnam amounted to communist aggression, both Presidents felt justified in selecting policies that would increase the use of military power.

The bureaucracy, being run by men well versed in the art of manipulating power, facilitated Presidential decisions by coming up with "modest" escalatory steps that would enable the President to tell the public he was responding with "restraint" to the other side's provocations. Presidents also found these suggestions appealing as tactical accommodations to their bu-

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reaucracy: such "small" steps would buy them time (though time for what has never been clearly articulated), get critics off their backs, and warn the opponent of harsher measures unless he desisted in South Vietnam. "Restrained" escalation became bureaucratic appeasement.

The bureaucracies concerned with Vietnam policy in the 1960s thrived on options; and the men who ran them, and reported directly to the President, thrived on the management of crises. In those few cases in which part of the bureaucracy sought to challenge the leadership's basic assumptions—such as CIA studies that destroyed the domino thesis, cogently criticized the bombing strategy, and closely questioned the feasibility of "rooting out" the Viet Cong "infrastructure"—it was ignored. Grand strategy is the responsibility of the crisis managers—the appointed members of the President's inner circle, not responsive to, and isolated from, congressional and public inquiry. Feeding these men information, not opinion, is the proper task of the bureaucratic machinery they control.

For these managers, "fascinated by the confrontation model of world politics," as Richard J. Barnet has so aptly phrased it, crises such as Vietnam were tests of their personal wills and of their ability to mobilize their organizational resources to help restore order and stability in distant societies. What they lacked in area expertise, empathy, and morality they made up for, or thought they did, in toughness and coolheadedness under fire. As they said, the job required "very steady nerves," readiness to "bite the bullet" and play "eyeball to eyeball" for high stakes. Vietnam was not simply America's war but, in very personal terms, theirs and their offices'. They would not, perhaps could not, let go.

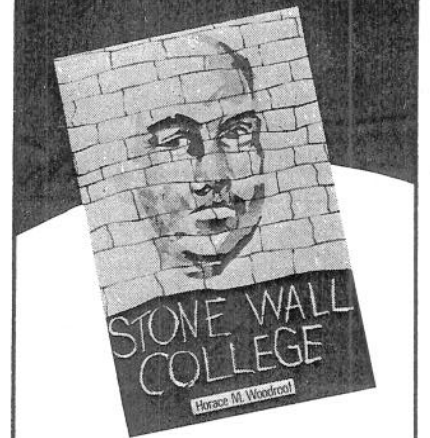
In an environment so geared to exerting national power, the few dissenters and questioners of policy should have recognized quite soon that they were being exploited. While they apparently thought they could be more effective inside than outside, their presence was actually more conducive to escalation than de-escalation. They became "institutionalized," as James C. Thomson has written—house doves

whom the leadership could point to in evidence of its openness to dissent. Conceivably, the presence of men like George Ball may have softened or delayed escalatory decisions. But the price for these concessions was agreement to stand by the President and make nationwide appearances in his behalf while his policies were failing and the war was getting hotter. The bureaucracy thus produced no important defections that might have damaged its "team" image to good effect.

When the Nixon Administration's Pentagon Papers become available, they will undoubtedly reveal the same arrogance of power and singlemindedness of purpose that lay behind the policymaking of previous administrations. They will contain, for example, the classified renditions of: the President's belief that the fall of South Vietnam would have unacceptable consequences for much of the rest of Asia (as recited in a televised interview of July 1, 1970); the President's fear of national humiliation if the United States were to be "defeated" in Vietnam (recall his April 30, 1970 speech on Cambodia: "I would rather be a one-term President than to be a two-term President at the cost of seeing America become a second-rate power and see this nation accept the first defeat in its proud 190-year history"); the President's personal identification with a Vietnam success ("I'm not going to be the first President to preside over an American defeat." Stewart Alsop has quoted Nixon as saying on several occasions); the reported choice of intervention in Cambodia as a modest alternative to doing nothing or doing much more; and the continued conviction that air power, and threats of escalation (masked as "protective reaction"), can ultimately force the communist Vietnamese to break off their struggle.

There is, however, a larger meaning to the persistence of similar patterns of thought and action through five administrations. The Vietnam experience shows the deliberateness with which Presidents, advisers, and bureaucracies time and again developed a consensus to exclude disengagement as a feasible, desirable alternative to protracted engagement. The war was

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consistently perceived as a threat to national and personal missions. Involvement was preferable to nonintervention because the former represented fulfillment of the wish to global predominance, while the latter meant abandonment of an imperial persuasion that had become a foreign policy tradition.

Melvin Gurtov worked on the Pentagon Papers Project in Washington while employed by the RAND Corporation. His most recent book is China and Southeast Asia—The Politics of Survival (D. C. Heath).

Letters

[CARNAL KNOWLEDGE—PORNOGRAPHY?]

Editors: I consider your December article on Prostitution one of the most singularly revolting things I have ever read in my life. I also consider myself well-read. The article was a crude piece of quasi-pornography relating not at all to the question of women's rights, and I assume the editor of RAMPARTS was aware of this when he [sic] approved the trash for publication.

The problem here is that I had looked upon RAMPARTS as a vocal and articulate organ of New Left thought, similar in character to such publications as *New Republic*, which purports to be, and is, a journal of art and politics. I had been under the quaint delusion that RAMPARTS was a similar magazine.

Obviously, however, as your porno article enhancing the seamy side of life proves, RAMPARTS is no such publication, but rather equivalent in nature to the scores of 25c trash that fills the back shelves of drugstores and railway station magazine stands. This is unfortunate because this country needs an articulate yet witty and progressive publication. . . .

Eric F. Edmunds
Princeton, N. J.

Editors: Re: Kate Coleman's essay, "Carnal Knowledge: A Portrait of Four Hookers." Make that five.

Joseph Whitehill
Chestertown, Md.

Editors: Kate Coleman's article on hustlers answered all the questions that previous ones always raised. Thank goodness I don't have to read any more "hooker" stories!

Laird Schmidt
New York, N. Y.

[A NATIONAL ORGANIZATION]

Editors: I have just finished reading Staughton Lynd's comment in the December issue of RAMPARTS, and I agree with him 100 percent. Since 1968 the movement has stagnated & fragmented & argued among itself about ideology instead of seeking new methods and issues to bring people together.

What we need now is a national movement with a solid base . . . a national organization, divided into local groups to work locally toward the national objective.

I also think that some thought should be given to the idea of "taking on" the corporate structure by using the same methods they use. For example, a national corporation operated at the local level (like a chain store) with the profits funneled through a non-profit foundation into local projects to better the lives of the common people.

The corporation & the foundation have been the tools used by the elite to preserve & obtain power & I think they could be used effectively by the people.

Admittedly these are not the ultimate answers . . . but it is becoming increasingly clear that the methods of demonstration and protest used in the past are no longer effective either in bringing about change or arousing the people to participation. . . .

Ron Pearson
San Francisco, Calif.

[COUNSEL FROM AN OLDER FRIEND]

Editors: Several months ago I wrote to you that I am 81 years old and my doctor advises me to stop reading if I don't want to be completely blind. Naturally I feel terrible that I can't read any more my preferred magazine, RAMPARTS. But no use for me to receive the magazine if I can't read it. But before I close this short letter, I want to give you some very good ad-