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The Nixon Outlook: Internationalism and Commitment

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WASHINGTON, March 10—President Nixon's highly personal definition of his foreign policy, given to The New York Times this week, amounted above all to a confident reassertion of the faith of the World War II generation of American "internationalists" against the challenge and disillusionment spread by the war in Vietnam. More directly than before, Mr. Nixon argued that he had kept the faith of the nineteen-forties and nineteen-fifties while the nation's once far-sighted Establishment was running out on its principles toward isolation and "weakness."

News Analysis

Though he calls his approach a new philosophy, the President clearly feels comfortable with the tenets, if not all the tactics, of the Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson years. And like all the wartime Presidents of this century, he is confident that success in containing the latest aggression overseas will make the current war the last for American infantrymen.

The United States, in the President's view, is a benign giant saddled only accidentally with the worldwide "responsibilities" of keeping the peace. He did not define those obligations but said they were best met by using American power as a counterweight against the inherently "expansionist" power of the Soviet Union and Communist China.

Like Lyndon Johnson and Dean Rusk, Mr. Nixon sees the defense of Sotuh Vietnam as an alternative to the kind of appeasement that was attempted with Hitler at Munich in 1938. The nation could not "fail" in Vietnam, he said, without inviting greater danger in Asia and elsewhere and a full-throated isolationism at home.

hTe Israelis readily understood the connection between their security and South Vietnam's, the President noted, probably wondering, as Mr. Johnson used to wonder, why so many of Israel's supporters in this country oppose the effort in Asia.

As offered in the interview with C. L. Sulzberger, foreign-affairs columnist of The Times, Mr. Nixon's concepts set the stage for the grand debate that has thus far been overwhelmed by arguments over tactics in Indochina. For the President's critics, most consistently heard in the Senate, reject the charge of isolationism and contend only that the country has been misspending its international energies by fighting the wrong enemy, in the wrong place and in the wrong way.

Neither side in this debate has yet lifted its sights from Vietnam to a larger definition of appropriate American commitments and interests abroad.

Nowhere in his long report on foreign policy last month or his more colloquial summary to The Times did the President attempt to catalogue the specific stakes for the United States in the defense of Indochina or Israel or India or Indonesia, or to match those stakes against risks that he would deem tolerable.

And by and large his critics, too, have been unable or unwilling to say what burden they would bear in the defense of different foreign nations and objectives.

So the air is charged now with denunciations of "militarism" and "neo-isolationism," while the real debate lies ahead. If the politics of the Democratic contenders for the Presidency are any guide, it will be a debate not only among the old "internationalists" but between them and their postwar sons and daughters, many of whom have been moved by the Vietnam issue to question the morality as well as the wisdom and effectiveness of recent American exertions abroad.

'A New Consciousness'

Just a few hours before Mr. Nixon received Mr. Sulzberger Monday, Henry Steele Commager, the historian, was telling the President's critics on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that it was not enough for them to seek to restrain the war-making power of the White House. Stating the case for what has been called "a new consciousness," he diagnosed the nation's "fundamental disease" as a "psychology of cold war, our obsession with power, our assumption that the great problems that glare upon us so hideously from every corner of the horizon can be solved by force."

Mr. Nixon, by contrast, sees nothing of the cold-war philosophy in his willingness to negotiate with both Moscow and Peking while insisting that "only the United States has sufficient strength to help maintain a balance" against them in virtually every continent. Not only weaker and dependent nations, he believes, but even "many Communist leaders" gratefully recognize that the United States wants nothing for itself save the chance for everyone to live and let live.

Thus, explaining the connection between his power diplomacy and his Quaker heritage, Mr. Nixon expressed confidence that the American people would support him against the undefined but elitist-sounding establishment.

Although he was using a newspaper to expound his views, he suggested that he might not have been able to get people to understand without his personal presentations on television.

Clue to Presidential Mood

The fact that Mr. Nixon gave the interview was itself an interesting clue to his mood. After two years of official reticence, which evoked complaints of his "isolation," he has been speaking out this year through a variety of channels and in ways that might project much more of his personality.

Last month, after a long talk with Peregrine Worsthorne of The Sunday Telegraph of London, the President went so far as to send him a memorandum of afterthoughts explaining how his parents' fierce adherence "to what is now deprecatingly referred to as Puritan ethics" shaped his strong sense of individualism and of opposition to the New Deal.

It has been suggested here that the President's new willingness to divulge some of his inner feelings bespeaks either a sense of confidence or of political vulnerability. Whatever the motive, he is moving out in front of the carefully honed policy declarations and inviting the country to see him and debate him as he is.