

Questions and Answers on the War Protest

NYTimes APR 22 1972

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Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, April 21 —

One of the difficulties with campus strikes and other demonstrations is that they tend to focus attention on the behavior of the protesters instead of the substance of the protest. Below is a compilation of the kind of questions that administration and its supporters are posing to their critics, at least rhetorically, and an effort to distill from Congressional debates and other discussion the responses of those critics.

Q. Why do you always criticize American escalation and minimize the attacks and policies of the North Vietnamese?

A. Because the conflict is essentially a war among the Vietnamese; because we are intruders in a situation with only peripheral geopolitical rather than local interest; because the death and destruction by both sides have been increased by our intervention and our introduction of super-weapons; because we are at war with a country that does not threaten us and against which very few Americans feel any grievance.

Q. Why do you excuse Soviet intervention in the same war and why would Communist conquest of South Vietnam represent a more moral form of destruction than our defensive effort?

A. The Russians have helped Hanoi only to the extent of offsetting the advantages of American power on the side of the Saigon Government; and nothing that the Vietnamese might do to each other would match the havoc caused by American intervention over more than a decade.

Q. But was not the United States well on the way toward complete withdrawal from the war and before Hanoi's offensive, showing great restraint in the use of its power?

A. The United States was sparing itself the heavy casualties of ground combat, but it was doing everything possible to perpetuate the war itself with massive equipping of the South Vietnamese and the retention of formidable American air and sea power, as we can now see. Increasingly, Vietnamization appeared to be not an alternative to negotiation but a substitute for it.

various offers in secret talks in Paris, including a

cease-fire and new elections under a mixed election commission, were genuine efforts to reach a settlement?

A. The central issue has always been the distribution of political power in Saigon. After our involvement and commitments to the Government of President Nguyen Von Thieu, the other side has no basis for confidence in an American-style, Saigon-run election. And since the United States refuses to trust their proposals for coalition, there has been no real negotiation of the main question and both sides look to the battlefield to resolve it—as if our stake in this equaled theirs.

Q. Why should we help them topple the Thieu Government and give them at the conference table the power they have never been able to acquire on the battlefield?

A. Because as long as Hanoi is willing to continue its war of more than 20 years, our side can never win, the South Vietnamese will never manage without our help and we have neither motive nor means for an indefinite involvement.

Q. But if North Vietnam were really confident that Vietnamization would fail, why did it not wait until after the United States has withdrawn all its troops and why did it not offer the potentially embarrassing bargain of release of all American prisoners in exchange for total withdrawal and an end of all bombing?

A. Because it does not believe the United States will disengage its advisers and air and naval forces or end its aid to Saigon unless forced to do so by battlefield reverses and public opinion at home; because it plans to hold the prisoners hostage until all those conditions are met; and because it sees the American election year as a time for achieving maximum political effect through military action.

Q. Does not the United States bear a heavy obligation to its dead and wounded in this war, to its prisoners of war and its honor and sense of commitment to the South Vietnamese, even if the obligations were too lightly assumed?

A. Further bloodshed that fails to serve the recognized interests of the American people can never redeem the sacrifices already made. The continuing demonstration of American impotence or stubbornness is no way of demonstrating honor. We have long

ago, and many times over, kept our commitment to help the South Vietnamese help themselves. The wisdom of a policy cannot be considered irrelevant to its perpetuation.

Q. Would you simply walk away from the war, let the Communists take over South Vietnam and leave our allies to an almost certainly bloody and painful fate?

A. Give the mood of the American people and the resources at our command, the only remaining power we have in Indochina is the power to negotiate for some conditions of our total withdrawal. That power has been diminishing during the years of the Nixon Administration and may be virtually exhausted, too. But presumably we could still extract some guarantees against massive reprisals and some political influence for the many South Vietnamese who do not wish to be swallowed up by Hanoi.

Q. What would be the reaction of the South Koreans and West Germans, to cite two other divided nations, if the United States proved unreliable in its commitments, or of dependent nations like Israel?

A. It is the Vietnam war, not the absence of it, that has sapped American energy and will and caused other nations to doubt the value of our support. Prolonging the war will not restore that trust, espe-

cially if our support tends to spread destruction among the people whom we set out to defend. It is not just American power but its wise use that would impress allies.

Q. Do you think the Russians or even the Chinese could respect us and agreements with us if they found the United States so weary that it would accept humiliation in Indochina and among its friends and allies?

A. Failure in Vietnam is not synonymous with defeat, and the redirection of American resources and energy would only enhance our strength. The Russians and Chinese have to a certain degree profited from our preoccupation and made diplomatic progress at our expense. Nonetheless they deal with us because they recognize the United States as a formidable power for generations to come.

Q. Do you think the American people would support a humiliating retreat without seeking scapegoats and damaging the country with witch-hunt and recrimination?

A. No failure is without pain or consequence, but it is difficult to imagine greater division and strife than that already caused by the war and the neglect of domestic reconstruction. Some politicians and strategists might be damaged or destroyed in the aftermath and some even unjustly. So what?