

# NYTimes The De-Escalation of Criticism

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By LESLIE GELB and ANTHONY LAKE

WASHINGTON—The war in Vietnam has escalated. The voices of criticism in Washington have not.

Why? Have the war critics come over to the President's side? No. Has boredom overtaken passion? For some people, yes. Have some given up in frustration about changing the President's policies? Yes, some have.

But most war critics in Washington, we think, have silenced themselves for two reasons: fear of charges of undercutting the President and fear of being undercut by him.

In a recent column, James Reston of The Times lashed out against the critics. He argued that opposition to President Nixon's policy makes Hanoi more intransigent. That may be true in a tactical sense. Hanoi does use criticism here in its propaganda. It also hopes internal American differences will provide the stimulus for any early American withdrawal. But the basic fallacy of charges about undercutting the President is this: no matter how unified the American public in support of President Nixon's goals in Vietnam, Hanoi will not give up its own goals and ambitions. It is the American presence in Vietnam which is prolonging the war, not the voices of criticism at home. And it is in Washington, not Hanoi, where American voices have their greatest effect.

If there is a chance of changing the President's policy, it is now when he faces an election campaign, not later, should he be re-elected. The U.S. presence in Vietnam would be far larger than today were it not for the public opposition of the past. Without strong opposition now, the President is free to pursue a policy which many opponents of the war believe will not work and is wrong. He should not expect them to unite behind such a policy.

Why then are so many critics' voices

still when they know that uniting behind an unworkable policy cannot make it work and when they should know that charges of undercutting the President are invalid? For some, the reason for silence is fear of being undercut themselves, the simple fear of looking foolish.

They are wary that the President has an ace up his sleeve. Despite their convictions, they hesitate on the chance that President Nixon might find peace or military success, and force them to admit the error of any pessimistic predictions they might make. While believing that America should not sacrifice human life to save face in Vietnam, they fear losing face themselves should the President keep his promise to "pull the rug out" from under them.

Thus the inhibiting power in Washington of the rumor of imminent success: a secret Vietnam deal worked out in Moscow by Chairman Brezhnev and Henry Kissinger . . . speculation that current U.S. terms for settlement is a disguise for successful American withdrawal . . . hints by Mr. Kissinger in private conversations that U.S. peace proposals are more lenient than they appear. . . Public predictions by men such as Senator Hugh Scott that peace may be around the corner. And many critics never seem to forget the President's own warning that Vietnam would not be an issue in the 1972 elections.

There are three reasons why such critics should put aside their fear and refuse to be immobilized.

First, the "aces" up our Presidents' sleeves have turned out, when disclosed in the past, to be little better than jokers. Military escalation has never done more than postpone Saigon's reverses. It is unlikely that even the mining and bombing can provide what President Nixon calls "decisive military action to end the war." New diplomatic offers have not been nego-

tiabile in the past. It is unlikely that the President's current offer will fare better, unless he removes his cease-fire requirement by defining it in ways that make it meaningless. Despite dramatic Presidential revelations, the war has always dragged on.

Second, if the President does help bring peace to Indochina before the election, he will receive so much praise that what the critics now say will make little political difference then.

Third, and most important, critics have the obligation to try to persuade the President to play an ace—to put forward a proposal that can safely end American participation in the war and gain the return of our men held captive.

The object of the critics should be to force the President to pull the rug from under them: It is not an easy thing for any person to invite his own embarrassment for larger ends. But this is the obligation of opponents of the war. They are asking old supporters of the war to admit that the United States has been wrong in Vietnam. They should now take the chance of being wrong themselves.

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