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One Man's War

By Warren D. Manshel

Vietnam has become one man's war. Whether it is his crusade to prove that he, personally, cannot be "pushed around," or that our inevitable eventual departure is "honorable" does not matter. What matters, aside from the supreme consideration of the human losses and suffering caused, is that the President used the period of Congressional adjournment and pre-occupation with the holiday season to intensify the war far above any previous level.

He has been able to do this without the encumbrance of Congressional advice; he did not need to consult anyone outside of his own staff and of the military.

The malaise begun during World War II with the belief that politics should end at the water's edge, the concept of bipartisanship in foreign policy, has now reached its fever point in the absolute power of the President to make total war. All the requisite powers to do so were delegated long ago. Now politics is not even involved: neither party shares in the responsibility of this purely Presidential decision.

In four years in office, Mr. Nixon has shown a persistent taste for personal diplomacy. Summit meetings with the heads of the Communist hierarchies in Peking and Moscow are a central ingredient in his style and sign of an overwhelming confidence in his personal abilities and influence. The Constitution assigns to the President predominance in the direction and conduct of foreign policy and they necessarily reflect his temperament and character as well as his view of our national interest. This is probably no more true of Mr. Nixon than of either of his immediate predecessors although he seems to have made fuller use of his prerogatives for personal initiative in the context of foreign policy that did Mr. Johnson, and at least as much as did Mr. Kennedy.

Control over foreign policy has been concentrated in the White House to an extent probably unprecedented in this century except during the Presidency of John Kennedy and the war-time days of Franklin Roosevelt. Only a few members of Mr. Nixon's official family appear in a position of full Presidential confidence. It would be hard to imagine the Nixon Cabinet as a forum for a general discussion or deliberation of the major Nixon initiatives relating to Vietnam: the "incur-sions" into Laos and Cambodia (decided upon in the Rose Garden of the White

House), the mining of North Vietnamese waters (announced dramatically by the President on TV), and the bombing.

Mr. Nixon seems far too conscious of his vast prerogatives and too confident of his ability to discharge them, to share them. He has taken literally Truman's dictum that the Oval Room of the White House is where the buck stops. Far from evading responsibility, he seems to enjoy it and to glory in his reputation as a man of tough fiber, a man who cannot be pushed around, an unpredictable man. And that is where the ultimate danger rests: in the conflict between restraint and unpredictability.

As a matter of constitutional principle, the management of foreign policy, while largely a Presidential prerogative, should at every point involve the express or tacit approval of Congress and the support of public opinion. When the President, dissatisfied with the achievements of his negotiator at the conference table in Paris, evidently decided to bomb North Vietnam into submission, he timed his decision shrewdly: with Congress adjourned, he could not be hampered by possible Congressional reaction. His decision to send Henry Kissinger back to Paris and stop his awesome bombing campaign neatly undercut incipient moves to legislate an end to the war. Although it is hard, after these many years and the broad powers already delegated to the President by Congress in this conflict, to believe that Congress might take some definitive action now to end this war, that possibility is far more real today than before. U.S. military activity in Vietnam no longer involves ground troops, and the argument that

we should not cut off support of American troops in the field consequently holds much less meaning.

If legislative restrictions seem no threat to the President's initiative in undertaking whatever military measures he wants in Vietnam, neither do the normal requirements of practical politics. Of course, neither Mr. Nixon nor his two predecessors have felt obliged in the course of this conflict to keep domestic reaction to our Vietnamese policy constantly in view. The American people have never shared in the decisions that committed our nation to war in Vietnam. To the contrary, it seems far more reasonable to assume that the majority of those who voted for Mr. Nixon last Nov. 7 voted as much to end the war as did those who voted against him. But it is now January and Mr. Nixon is his own man, and he cannot be held to account for quite some time. In the meantime, the bombing halt will continue, or it will be resumed, as Mr. Nixon alone determines.

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