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America in Anguish,

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"I can conceive of no greater tragedy than for the United States to become involved in an all-out war in Indochina."

Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1952.

By Laurence Stern

Washington Post Staff Writer

It started imperceptibly, like a mild toothache.

Then it ran like a pestilence through American society, impeaching "the system" and its leadership in the eyes of a generation, bloating the economy with war inflation, disrupting universities, blighting political careers, spreading the plague of heroin, generally shattering the conventional faith in the decency of American purposes.

It was celebrated in the score of the musical, "Hair," as a "dirty, little war." And that is how it imprinted itself on the emotions of the country along a course that became well defined in the public opinion polls and the politics of the Vietnam war years.

More than 2½ million young Americans went to the war and most returned, without the Main Street farewell parades or welcome-home hoopla that our nostalgia associates with earlier wars. It is unlikely that ebullient multitudes will pack Times Square to acclaim its end, as they did World Wars I and II. For a large number of families the metal caskets in which the remains of 55,000 Americans came back from Vietnam will forever symbolize the war's ultimate and only meaning.

It was some time before most Americans realized they had gone to war in Vietnam. The gradual ties of commitment had been forged during the 1950s: we had taken over from the French the burden of training and financing the Saigon army; we had legitimized, indeed installed, the regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1955; we had stepped up military and economic aid to the Diem government; we had dispatched under John F. Kennedy as many as 16,000 "advisers."

An ironic footnote to the Kennedy involvement was an announcement by U.S. military spokesmen in Saigon five days before the assassination in Dallas that 1,000 American servicemen would be withdrawn from South Vietnam. Might we, back then, have been embarked on a course of disengagement?

If there is a single lesson to have been learned from the Pentagon Papers affair it was that the preparatory steps for full-scale involvement in the war were taken within the sound-proofed sanctums of the White House and national security councils of the government. The press chronicled the arrivals and departures of special missions and recorded the convening of top secret meetings and the transmission of special reports. But what was missing, too often, in those dispatches was the substance of what was going on.

The adversary process both within and outside government was held to a minimum. The public position of the Johnson administration, even during the initial stages of the big buildup in 1965, was that there had been no change in policy. And so, at a time when the President had embarked toward full-scale commitment of U.S. military power to the Saigon government, Congress and the public went along.

Sen. J. William Fulbright (D-Ark.) was cheerfully endorsing the Gulf of Tonkin resolution and Daniel Ellsberg was still committed to winning the war. Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., at a Washington teach-in, was advocating more American ground troops in South Vietnam and less bombing in the North.

Year of Optimism

The year we went to war the national mood was one of palmy optimism, at least by the standards of the later 1960s. Lyndon Johnson was still flushed with his popularity ratings and carried his Gallup and his Harris to enlighten political visitors and doubters in the press.

Civil rights was the burning issue in the media as well as on the agenda of national social concerns. President Johnson seemed to have met the brunt of the demands of what was then called "the Negro revolution" by winning passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. He was also offering the vision of a Great Society—a phrase that sounds jarringly grandiloquent from the perspective of the 1970s—to fill all our unmet needs and enshrine his own place in history.

Even that alliance of middle class, white college youth that became the core of The Movement and the New Politics was preoccupied with rent strikes, Mississippi summer projects, community organization and voter registration.

The Students for a Democratic Society, born at a convention in Port Huron, Mich., in 1962, did not bring its first organized protest against the war to Washington until Easter, 1965, after the American war in Vietnam had begun.

The year we went to war the economy was booming at nearly full capacity. Inflation had been curbed to an annual growth of less than 2 per cent. Extraordinary price stability had marked the first half of the decade. Corporate profits had taken a healthy jump to more than 5 per cent. Some 71 million Americans were employed and only 4.5 per cent of the work force was idle. The prime interest rate had remained at 4.5 per cent from 1960 through 1965. The market was generally rosy and the nation seemed to be entering the full summer of the decade.

From the Johnson White House constant exhortations were being made for wars on poverty, wars on ignorance, wars on disease and discrimination. There was still widespread faith

in presidential activism and the efficacy of government programs.

And there was also the war, to which the nation was never formally pledged, that was to reduce the Great Society to a ruin of mouldering press releases and gamey prose. The war in Vietnam.

In the ensuing three years — 1966, 1967 and 1968 — American public opinion was to undergo sharp and unsettling changes in its attitudes toward the war, the national leadership and trust in government.

Albert Cantril, of the Institute for International Social Research, speaks of the ambivalence and frustration of the country during that period. There was the dilemma of the public's growing opposition to the war on practical grounds (financial costs, casualties and the seeming military insolubility) and its susceptibility to the strong appeals from the White House for support in the name of patriotic anti-Communism.

"The tragedy," wrote Cantril, "is that there would be no way for the American people to say 'no' to the President in time to preclude his initiation of actions further committing the United States and raising the ante in Vietnam at a time when this is the last thing the public wants."

The President, theorized Cantril, could mobilize public opinion to support a major escalation by appealing to ideology even though it did not seem, to many, the course of practical wisdom.

A Sagging Confidence

It was a form of national schizophrenia that heightened the agony and sense of muddle over Vietnam. But as the costs of the war expanded and the prospects of "victory" did not, public confidence sagged measurably both in government and the elected leadership.

The University of Michigan's Survey Research Center found that 47 per cent of a cross-section of adult voters polled in 1965 felt the government wasted a lot or nearly all the money paid in taxes. By 1970 this jaded view of the government's competence was shared by 69 per cent of the sample population.

A companion study by the center of high school graduates also showed a sharp drop-off in what was called the "trust in government" index. This and other studies of youth attitudes asserted a measurable relationship between the war and belief in "the system."

In Cantril's view the fact that the student protesters represented only a numerical minority of younger Americans may not be significant. He sees the protests as the symptom of "the alienation of a generation of leadership" and its attitudes toward the American role in world affairs as well as the ability of our large institutions to solve national problems.

To a large number of the young, and not merely those who joined protest marches and occupied university administration buildings, Vietnam was seen as the Establishment's ultimate achievement. "It represents," Cantril concluded, "the inability of our large institutions to understand the nature of the world in which we are living and their consequent complicity in further compounding the world's problems by doggedly applying resources in the wrong place and in the wrong way."

In mid-1967 the Gallup poll indicated that half of all American voters had no clear idea what the war in Vietnam was all about.

The role of the draft in fueling the antiwar movement is a subject upon which the public opinion industry will dine for some time to come. But there are direct correlations between the deepening bite of the selective service process and the increasing stridency of the antiwar protests that lead to obvious assumptions.

In 1966 the draft reached only about 2 per cent of the youths eligible to serve and only half of those were being assigned to Vietnam. By 1967 the year-end buildup of American manpower in Vietnam rose to 449,000 (up from a previous year-end level of 267,000). By the end of 1968 the total was 534,700. In March, 1969, the peak was 541,500. For both 1968 and 1969 the draft call approached 300,000.

Those were the years of the "trash-ing" of university buildings and the most intense ferment on the campuses. "Hell no, we won't go," chanted the young demonstrators in the moratorium protests along the Potomac. And even though a majority of Americans registered themselves in the polls as opposed to demonstrations, the underlying reality was that the country was moving predominantly in the same direction.

At the full height of the American military involvement, the 1967 to 1969 period, the war was entering the living rooms of America each evening, and just before dinner time. For a growing number of families it was not just black-and-white but living color. New Yorker writer Michael Arlen called it The Living Room War and it was probably television's most important single impact on American public opinion.

The Realities on TV

What the nation was seeing on the 6:30 news shows did not correspond to the generally optimistic picture that was being drawn of the war by an administration that had staked its reputation on a military victory in South Vietnam.

The complicated realities of Vietnam intruded on the home audience for the

first time, blurring the distinctions between good guys and bad guys, presenting at first hand the devastation that was being inflicted on a remote peasant society by both sides. Most importantly, there was the spectacle of Americans dying and bleeding in the mountains and paddies of the Indo-chinese peninsula. Ward Just, then The Washington Post's correspondent in Vietnam, formulated the prevailing question of the time in the title of a book: To What End?

In June, 1967 the general board of the National Council of Churches of Christ became the first major religious organization to dissent formally from the U.S. military involvement in Vietnam. In the ensuing months and years war dissent became not only respectable within the broad reaches of the American elite. It was to become fashionable.

Concurrent with the revolution on the streets there was a more subdued but probably more influential deflection within the Establishment. Some of the very men who had been the architects and top managers in the early Johnson years were losing their faith.

Agonizing Conversions

Robert S. McNamara, chief logistician, strategist, target officer, booster and explainer, made a slow and agonized conversion in his final year at the Pentagon. By day he was obliged to run the war and by night he vented his private despair in Georgetown living rooms. The influential Bundy brothers, McGeorge and William, also turned the corner and perceived the unlighted end of the tunnel. Both published their gentle self-exculpations on Vietnam in Foreign Affairs, vulgarly known as the Bible of the foreign policy establishment. William Bundy is the editor-designate of Foreign Affairs.

The dominoes began falling, not in Southeast Asia but at home. Clark M. Clifford, Washington's preeminent political lawyer, became disenchanted with the war while running the Defense Department and his turn-about set an example for much of the top layer of the policy-making bureaucracy at the Pentagon and State Department.

Wall Street was also taking a new, hard-eyed view of the war and particularly President Johnson's ability to provide both guns and butter. The New York Times, Time and Life, Newsweek and other influential publications came out one by one for an end to the bombing, a phasing out of the big American military effort and negotiated solution of the war. And on Capitol Hill the flutter of doves crossed party lines in a steady crescendo.

Congress followed the President's lead through the period of the war build-up with hardly a murmur of op-

position. But starting in 1969 there were increasing efforts on Capitol Hill, particularly from within the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, to confine the American presence in the Indochina conflict.

The first major attempt was the Cooper-Church amendment, signed into law in 1969, to prohibit the use of ground troops in Laos and Thailand. It was supplemented in 1971 by a prohibition on American troops in Cambodia and a limitation on the size of the U.S. civilian presence. In January, 1971 Congress repealed the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which was used by President Johnson as a charter for his escalatory policies in Vietnam.

There were dozens of other limiting amendments floated in both houses—again mainly at the initiation of the Foreign Relations Committee—but many of them sank with the scuttling of the foreign aid bill this year and the administration's decision to administer foreign aid under a continuing resolution rather than a new appropriation.

The economic indicators were giving the lie to the guns and butter argument. Inflation sent the cost of living spiraling nearly 3 per cent in 1966 and again in 1967; up 4.2 per cent in 1968, up 5.4 per cent in 1969 with a peak rise of 5.9 per cent in 1970. Corporate profits, which climbed steadily to a level of 5.6 per cent in the first half of the decade, fluttered between 5 and 4 per cent for the remainder of the decade. Unemployment dropped slightly and wages increased but inflation tended to level off the spendable earnings of most workers.

The candidacy of Eugene McCarthy provided a rallying ground for the antiwar movement and the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy destroyed its hopes for a quick termination of the conflict.

Chicago Psychodrama

The 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago was a poignant psychodrama in which the frustration of "the movement," now bereft of its own leadership, was being played out on the streets while the traditional leadership of the Democratic Party ratified its will on the divided delegates in the hall.

Lyndon Johnson's abdication and his decision to end the bombing and turn toward negotiation by the end of 1968 signaled an end to a major phase of the war: our hope of ending it by military victory.

In the past four years President Nixon has set a course of gradually reducing the most politically visible costs of the war in the form of American lives and money. The tempo of protest has ebbed, along with the reduction of draft calls. It raises questions about the depth of idealism of the young who came with their back-

packs and bedrolls during the era of college deferments to protest on the Ellipse.

The American military role in Indochina is now confined mainly to the air, to Thai bases and to the ships of the Seventh Fleet in the South China Sea and Gulf of Tonkin.

Formidable Costs

After Mr. Nixon became President and pledged to bring the war to an end the costs remained formidable. Some 20,000 Americans, somewhat less than half the total for the war, were killed. There were an additional \$55.5 billion in direct government expenditures to fight the war. Vietnamese military and civilian casualties numbered more than a million. The heaviest air war in the world's history was launched by the United States to compensate for the dwindling American ground presence.

The massive B-52 bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong in December after the Paris talks fell into a seeming deadlock kindled anew public criticism of the Nixon administration's war policies. Denunciations poured in from foreign capitals and there were new editorial condemnations in the American press. In Washington there were renewed demands not only from Democrats on Capitol Hill but also Congressional Republicans for a speedy conclusion of the peace talks and an end to major U.S. military involvement in the war.

The drug scourge spread. The Senate Veterans' Affairs subcommittee estimated that there are about 100,000 addicts among Vietnam veterans.

The so-called Vietnam "peace dividend" has failed to materialize, in the view of congressional budget watchers, because of rising defense costs associated with conversion to a volunteer army and building up the Pentagon's strategic weapons inventory.

However the bulk of the economic costs of the war itself have been paid, or at least that is the consensus of economists both within and outside the administration. Economic reconversion from the Vietnam war economy is substantially behind us. The incremental costs of the war—those costs directly attributable to the conflict—have gone from a peak of \$21.5 billion in Fiscal 1969 to an estimated \$5.8 billion in Fiscal 1973.

But operations since September, including the waves of B-52 strikes over the North that began on December 18 have added an estimated \$1 to \$2 billion to the original 1973 forecast.

Over the next half-century there will be a continuing drain of perhaps \$150 billion or \$200 billion in benefits to the veterans who fought the war.

And there undoubtedly will persist the question that haunted the country at the height of the conflict:

To what end? □



AP Wirephoto—Associated Press

Evacuating the wounded: As images of bleeding and dying intruded on America's living rooms, the haunting question arose — To what end?