

Saturday Review

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Vietnam and the Fourth Group

UNTIL RECENT WEEKS, American public opinion on the war in Vietnam has tended to form into three groups. One group has advocated the direct use of military force to whatever extent might be necessary to crush North Vietnam, regardless of the risk of wider war. A second group has favored complete military and political withdrawal, regardless of the risk of chaos and widespread slaughter. The third group, according to most of the indications, has been the dominant one. It has supported a course, outlined by the President, that seeks to avoid either total escalation or total pullout, putting our main emphasis on ending the war through negotiations. Beyond negotiations, this third group sees a chance for the Vietnamese, under the auspices perhaps of the United Nations, to have a test of self-determination, and an opportunity for the United States to help rehabilitate all of Vietnam.

In recent weeks, however, a fourth group in American public opinion has been taking shape. It is drawing much of its strength from the third group. This fourth group consists of those who formerly supported the President's declared policy for an honorable peace through negotiations but regard the bombing as inconsistent with that objective. It is also becoming apprehensive and aroused over the growing evidence that the President's policy is being negated or contradicted within the Government itself.

The evidence of contradiction is accumulating. It is now known that as long ago as August 1964, U.N. Secretary General U Thant conveyed a message

about possible negotiations to the U.S. State Department. The message made known Hanoi's willingness to participate in talks with the United States. The suggested place for the meeting was Rangoon, Burma. President Johnson had previously emphasized the desire of the United States to avoid a punitive settlement. U Thant had supported the President's plea in a private communication to the government in Hanoi. The reply from Hanoi was encouraging but U Thant was unable to get any response out of the State Department for more than four months. Finally, U Thant learned that the State Department, despite public statements to the contrary, was opposed to negotiations at the time because it feared that peace measures might produce another collapse of the government in South Vietnam. Later, it was reliably learned that the State Department had failed to inform the President of the opportunity for negotiations presented by U Thant.

Several weeks after the failure to get talks started in Rangoon, the President announced he was authorizing air bombing in Vietnam. One of the reasons publicly given was that Hanoi had shown no positive response to the effort to end the war through negotiations.

A second item of evidence now coming to light has to do with quiet exploratory talks with North Vietnam that had been painstakingly arranged and that were about to take place in Warsaw, Poland, as recently as December 1966. On the eve of the exploratory talks, the United States bombed the city of Hanoi, despite its earlier assurances it had no

intention of attacking civilian targets. That was the end of the talks. The U.S. State Department denied that the bombing had occurred and stood by the denial until the testimony of eyewitnesses, Americans among them, became irrefutable. President Johnson sought to reactivate the Warsaw negotiations by assuring Hanoi that he was banning bombing operations within a specified distance of the city; but it was too late.

A third fact concerns the repeated statements by Dean Rusk, Secretary of State, to the effect that the United States would stop the bombing if it had any indication that North Vietnam was prepared to respond with de-escalation moves of its own. The Secretary's position, on the face of it, was reasonable enough. It takes two sides to scale down a war. It now develops, however, that a message saying Hanoi was willing to enter into reciprocal de-escalation was conveyed to the U.S. State Department early in January 1967. The message said that Hanoi was prepared to offer a permanent cease-fire if the United States would stop the bombing. Despite this fact, the Secretary continued to say he had received no sign of Hanoi's willingness to cut back on the war.

Such facts are known not just to a few. They are being discussed with consternation in Congressional quarters, in capitals throughout the world, in the United Nations, in the Vatican, and wherever foreign correspondents are gathered. These facts represent a liability in America's relationship to the rest of the world.

This is the background against which a new public opinion is emerging in the United States. This public opinion has had no difficulty in supporting the declared policy of the United States in Vietnam. But it is now discovering that the declared policy may not be the real policy. It is discovering that the government itself is not of a piece on vital questions in foreign affairs and that sectors of the government can move in direct contradiction to the President. The President has succeeded in persuading most of the American people against an irresponsible enlargement of the war or an irresponsible and precipitate withdrawal, but he appears to be less persuasive inside his own house.

Whatever the vagaries of American public opinion, there are finite limits to its capacity to be manipulated. A free society has a way of developing an instinct for reality. It also places a proper value on its good name before the rest of the world. American public opinion may be many things but it is not cynical. It is also the major element in any effective conduct of government policy, at home or abroad. It demands respect, not as an indulgence but as the firmest of all its natural rights. —N.C.

ena, even building a ship for the purpose, before he learned that Bonaparte had been dead for some time. There is also Timothy Dexter of Newburyport, who, when he wasn't engaged in selling warming pans to West Indians in exchange for molasses ladles, wrote *Pickles for the Knowing Ones*. All punctuation in that work, the guide informs us, appeared at the end in several pages of solid commas and periods under the caption "Salt and Pepper to Taste."

As Cantwell pointed out, discussions of local architecture gave considerable space to secret rooms, hidden stairways, and false halls, which seem to have been one of the odder preoccupations of early American builders. And when these sober forebears of ours weren't concentrating on trapdoors and sliding panels they seem to have busied themselves composing humorous epitaphs for themselves and their relations. Much of their frivolity finds its way into the guides, along with information of a more conventional and less amusing nature. So do legends, ghost stories, and countless tales of lovers' leaps, usually made by frustrated and romantic Indians. The Missouri guide is especially rich in superstitious lore, which in the Mississippi basin seems to have changed little since the boyhood of Huckleberry Finn. For a visitor it is pleasant, and for one writing about the area downright useful, to know that in the Ozarks some still hold it an ill omen to see a cross-eyed person, especially at the intersection of two pathways; believe that the initials of one's future spouse will appear on a handkerchief left out in a wheatfield on the night of April 30; and are convinced that a hoop snake will put its tail in its mouth and roll toward an intended victim, even going uphill, faster than a horse can run.

Criticism of the Writers' Project was comparatively mild. The only valid point of any importance was the fact that the excellence of its work — not only the guides, but also the "Life in America" series, ranging from *The Italians of New York* to *Baseball in Old Chicago*—owed so much to the handful of experts who edited them or contributed to them from the outside. The handicaps, on the other hand, were formidable. Besides red tape, local pressure, the constant draining away of the best reporters, and the incompetence of the worst, there was always the threat from Capitol Hill. No one ever knew when Congress would cut appropriations, condemn the work being turned out, or eliminate the Project altogether.

In the consequently jittery and tentative atmosphere, morale, not high to begin with at a wage scale averaging \$90 a month, wobbled badly. Relief investigators snooped about to make sure that nobody had a spare dime to squirrel away; the future was shaky; and people

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"Ye gads! I just got the all-over picture!"

on the Projects talked constantly of getting a "real job." Since no increases in pay were attainable by direct action, collective bargainers concentrated on being recognized as collective bargainers, on raising *rates* of pay by getting their hours reduced, and on violently protesting the periodic appearance of pink slips announcing layoffs.

Inevitably, Communists were charged with leading the uprisings that broke out from time to time, and there is not much doubt that by way of the Workers Alliance they had a good hand in them. On one occasion some 600 workers on the Art and Writers' Projects staged a sit-in for days at the 42nd Street offices of the agency, barricading the administrator in his cubbyhole and cutting off all incoming telephone calls. The only concession was that a fortunate subordinate was allowed to leave from time to time to take special calls at a saloon across the street. Aubrey Williams, among the most militant of the Administration liberals, put in a request for a police escort to get the officials out and clear the building, but the most Mayor La Guardia would do was to send an officer around every couple of hours to make sure the sagging floor wouldn't collapse under the unnatural load — which for the sake of drama included an extra complement of the maimed and the pregnant. Only when the administrator agreed to recommend cancelation of threatened layoffs

was he allowed to leave, happily reassigned to Washington.

Such excesses were no doubt a drag on the program, as were the fulminations of Congressmen and the endless charges of "boondoggling" by newspaper editors who somehow never thought of their own highly perishable editorials in that light at all; who must indeed have thought that their repetitious carping would outlast the guides, the Index of American Design, the native songs preserved by the Music Project, the impact of Shakespeare on De Funiak Springs, Florida, and all the rest of the WPA's unique experiment in Federal art.

IT was, all in all, a magnificent experiment and one that went far to bear out Gutzon Borglum's eloquent letter to Aubrey Williams when the WPA was still a gleam in the eye of Harry Hopkins: "I want to suggest to you that you make your thought of aid to the creative ones among us greater, more effective in scope. . . . You are not after masterpieces, and you should not be discouraged if you have many failures; the real success will be in the interest, the human interest, which you will awaken; and what that does to the nation's mind. I believe that's the door through which Hopkins, you, and his aides can coax the soul of America back to interest in life." It certainly coaxed it over to a somewhat *different* life.

Gospel

By John Frederick Nims

Fresh from another's bed, that kiss for me?
Here's generous flesh, my dear? Soul's charity?
Or is the poor head puzzled? Good words run
Love one another. Not: another one.