

REESTABLISHING A DIALOGUE WITH

THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

American public opinion is currently confused, tired, ambivalent and in many ways quite volatile. The mandate of the President-elect is ambiguous at best. The talks in Paris appear to have an uncertain future. The level of military activity has swung from the highs of the Tet and May offensives to the current uneasy lull.

Current Mood

A review of recent public opinion survey findings indicates that public feeling about Viet-Nam is characterized by:

- A marked shift in opinion in the direction of deescalation--particularly since Tet.
- A reluctance to disengage from Viet-Nam if it would likely lead to a Communist take-over.
- An expectation of some form of compromise political settlement--but only on honorable terms.
- Support for whatever bombing policy the President judges to be in the best interests of peace.
- Cynicism about the likely outcome of the Paris talks and about Hanoi's intentions there.
- Little confidence in the ability of the South Vietnamese to defend and govern themselves.
- Lack of an adequate understanding of what the war is about.

Inherent Dangers

This volatile state of public feeling about the war has several dangers inherent in it:

(1) Psychological let down following a honeymoon period

The American people will expect something new from the new President. There will no doubt be a "honeymoon" period in which the public will watch expectantly for changes and allow the new President considerable latitude.

- How long this period will last is problematical, but it is certain that it will be followed by some sort of psychological let down--unless of course there is

progress toward a settlement.

- This let down could be compounded if some major new tack has been attempted and failed.

(2) Susceptibility to extreme solutions

The public's cynicism about dealing with Hanoi has no doubt tempered expectations about what might follow the bombing cessation.

Nonetheless, as frustration over the lack of progress in South Viet-Nam merges with an increased awareness of the many costs of the war, there is a danger that a confused and impatient public opinion will become susceptible to accepting one or another extreme alternative that seems promising and that could ultimately overshadow the larger objectives for which we became involved.

(3) Little basis for consensus

There is some doubt about how much of a "silent center" remains among the American people on Viet-Nam.

- Recent surveys have shown that roughly three-quarters of the public favors either increasing or decreasing the level of our involvement.
- This leaves only one in four that endorses the thrust of our policy.

In an election year and as a new President assumed power, this one-fourth represents precious little with which to build a consensus--especially if opinion polarizes around the ends of the escalate-deescalate continuum.

(4) Overreaction to events

There is considerable danger of public overreaction to events in two respects:

- There is a high probability that the Viet-Nam issue has lost much of its salience for large segments of the population and become a nagging ever present source of anxiety. Such a state of mind could be the precondition for overreaction to a precipitous event as an already uneasy public began to set definite limits on the continuing expenditure of American lives and treasure.
- The American people probably have an unrealistic view of what we are up against in Viet-Nam. Tet was a major blow here at home--demonstrating how far we had to go. Thus without an adequate understanding of the nature of the conflict and the dimensions of the problem, opinion will remain volatile and dangerously reactive to events.

(5) False sense of conclusion

Should some form of political settlement in Viet-Nam be forthcoming in the short term, people may acquire a false sense of conclusion to the problems of insurgency in Southeast Asia.

Recommendations

In order to mitigate against the dangers inherent in the current mood and to buy sufficient time here at home to allow a revised strategy time to work in Viet-Nam, a dialogue with the American people must be reestablished. Action in four areas is recommended:

(1) Clarify the role of the President-elect

With the turbulent events of the year and the last few weeks in particular, the American people are undoubtedly uneasy about the transition period. As a first step of reassurance, President Johnson and President-elect Nixon could appear jointly on nationwide TV and discuss their understanding about the transition process.

- Mr. Nixon's role in policy formation prior to January 20 could be explained as could the role of his personal staff and his Secretaries-Designate of State, Defense and Treasury.
- Both men have already referred to this critical period and such a joint appearance could give Mr. Nixon a leg up on his dialogue with the American people.

Upon assuming office, Mr. Nixon may want to revive the "fireside chat" forum for frequent briefings of the public on where we stand in Viet-Nam.

- The principal advantage of this type of contact is that the President--not the press--defines the substance of what is said.
- Press conferences would of course continue to play a major role, but periodic "chats" could greatly enhance President Nixon's stature as educator of a public opinion that still understands very little about the important issue of Viet-Nam.

(2) Clarify and integrate the rationale for the war

There are two aspects to the rationale for our involvement in Viet-Nam: why we acted and what we hope to achieve. The public debate has been confused by a tendency to blur the distinction between the two. Argumentation about the first has been excessively belabored while the second has received insufficient attention. For example, SEATO is fundamental to our justification for being in Viet-Nam, but its utility in eliciting support for what we are trying to do in Viet-Nam is only marginal.

Three steps are recommended to help integrate more fully our rationale for acting in Viet-Nam:

- Educate people about the political nature of the war and the essentially political character of any settlement.
- Communicate the relationship between specific courses of action to desired outcomes in a way that is meaningful to the American people. Simply cataloging the success of "programs" as has been the tendency in the past is not adequate to tie together effectively ends and means.
- Try to humanize the Vietnamese by portraying the humanness of their concerns and way of life. After all, there will be a Vietnamese winner and a Vietnamese loser.

(3) Talk with the public, not at it.

Bill Moyers wrote in the July Foreign Affairs: "The war was begun, enlarged and still is being waged without a clear declaration of support by a majority of the American people. I do not suggest that a war can be justified merely because it enjoys majority support, but I am sure that in this day of mass and immediate communications it is impossible to sustain successfully even a justified war to which people have not given their consent. Viet-Nam has proven that good intentions on the part of a nation's leaders will not substitute for the conscious involvement of the people in the decision to go to war."

While there are basic constitutional questions that arise about the advise and consent role of both the public and the legislative branch in limited war situations, there are several lessons in the public affairs area that Viet-Nam has taught us:

- (a) Communicate the bases for judgment: There is a tendency for people in positions of high administrative responsibility to develop great confidence in their own judgments. They feel more competent than others to survey situations and make the right judgments. This, of course, is their job. But when the public is involved, officials frequently fail to realize that this confidence must be communicated with more than an announced decision. A chief executive cannot expect people to have confidence in his judgment simply because it is his. He must indicate what are some of the major considerations he has taken into account so that people will know that what he has decided is both the right and effective policy to pursue. The people will allow the President significantly more latitude with respect to means than to ends, but he must make them feel a part of his decision and a partner in the policy.
- (b) Practice understatement: It is well to avoid overstating today what will be regretted tomorrow. In short, stay with the old adage of using understatement and overperformance. This is particularly crucial in three areas. First, the public should not be given

to expect too much out of Paris and should be prepared for a long haul. Second, the military situation in South Viet-Nam must be portrayed with considerable candor. Third, the South Vietnamese should be heralded as taking over the effort only to the extent to which they clearly are.

(c) Avoid a debating psychology: Much of the public affairs program related to Viet-Nam to date has taken the form of a debate with the public--and the more vocal elements in particular. Certainly the dialogue with the American people must be one of substance, but an overbearing and fatigued "scoring of debating points" with the New Left and other critics is tedious and unproductive. With Goethe, "Gefuhl ist alles", and the more that can be done to communicate the flavor of the conflict, the humanity of the people we are helping and the mood of confidence in East Asia, the better.

4. Revitalize our public information program

While events are the most effective molders of opinion and authoritative policy pronouncements run a close second, a coordinated public information program is essential.

Presently a host of offices in Washington and Saigon are in the public affairs business. The current effort, however, is not as integrated and as imaginative as is required. In particular:

- There has been a lack of systematic inventory, reference and distribution of public affairs materials.
- Opportunities for systematic cross-referencing, evaluation and support of public affairs activities in disparate parts of the U.S. Government have been only partially exploited.
- Information available is frequently inadequate, outdated, unconvincing or contradictory.
- Responsibilities for the collection, evaluation and use of Viet-Nam-related information have not been delineated.

It is proposed that a Viet-Nam Information Office be established to serve as the central reference point for all public affairs activities relating to Viet-Nam. Action offices would furnish relevant information and interpretive material on a systematic and regular basis. The Viet-Nam Information Office would in turn provide the participating user-offices with the following services:

- a) Establishment of an updated inventory of significant statements, correspondence, articles and research for inclusion in a topically indexed reference system (possibly using microfiche/xerox-filing, retrieval and duplicating methods).

- b) Adaptation and updating of selected fact sheets, talking points, question and answer sets, research, etc. on priority topics, for use as research support in the preparation of official statements on Vietnam.
- c) Regular (e.g. weekly or bi-monthly) distribution of a bibliographical list and/or copies of significant new acquisitions for use by participating user-offices.
- d) Regular listing of upcoming major speeches and conferences having a Vietnam-oriented focus. Preparation of back-up and distribution materials as required.
- e) Regular collection and evaluation of feed-back reports from participating offices to help clarify priority information issues, assets, requirements, tasks and schedules.