

defections are up fourfold. Rusk concluded: "On the present basis, they are not going to come out of it like they had hoped."

Of course, he said, a question is: "What are the big brothers going to do?" The evidence is that they are "more cautious in action than in words." "It's a tough game we're playing and we could be wrong," he warned. And he added quickly: "The President cannot rely on a guess on this subject."

"Everybody can say, 'Sorry, boss, I was wrong,'" except him. Those who make policy, Rusk continued, can "draw no doctrinal conclusion about what the other side will *not* do. Decisions have to be based on all contingencies and all consequences of various alternatives." "If the other side is as concerned as they ought to be in similar fashion, maybe we'll get some peace out of it at some point."

In response to a question of mine, Rusk switched back to the subject of the hearings held by the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations. He started with some heat that Senator Fulbright declares we ought to offer "the other side" something. Yet, Rusk said, "nobody is offering us anything."

As our talk on Vietnam was drawing to a close, Rusk seemed to sum up his feelings on the critics. He said plainly: "We're caught between the hawks and the doves."

The next morning, I had an appointment at the White House to see the President. He greeted me in his oval office, and immediately led the way into what he had called, the last time I saw him, his "little office," a place he can retreat to just off the main room. Mr. Johnson asked me if he could get me a soft drink; he was having one. I accepted. I sat on a small sofa. The President sat in an easy chair facing me; Press Secretary Bill Moyers, who had joined us, sat across from us. The President turned to me, his mind plainly on the American soldiers in Vietnam and began to talk.

He was proud, he said, that we had moved between 150,000 and 200,000 men into Vietnam with "the greatest efficiency in the history of the world." He spoke of the medical facilities which had been built and of the care which is waiting for our wounded when they arrive from the field. General Westmoreland, he said, has called our Army "the most mobile

under any flag, the best-equipped and the one with the most firepower per man." He said he had asked Westmoreland if he was short of anything and he had replied that he was short of nothing that affects the effectiveness or morale of our men.

The President returned to thoughts of the casualties. "We have," he said, "the lowest ratio of dead to wounded we've ever had," and he attributed that to the mobility of our forces. He marveled at how, through the use of helicopters, it is possible to move a man from the battlefield to a hospital in 30 minutes to an hour. He had praise not only for the medical people but also for the search-and-rescue units.

Then Mr. Johnson alluded to the Vietcong losses. He said they had suffered close to 30,000 killed, wounded, missing and captured in two months. "We don't think Hanoi has yet realized how serious it is," he observed gravely. "They are looking at things through rose-colored glasses, intoxicated perhaps by the debate back here." He said it will take awhile for "their own casualties to catch up with them."

The President shared with me the weekly cable to him from Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge in Saigon, which had just arrived. It was labeled "Secret Nodis" ("Nodis" is Government language for "not for distribution"). It summarized for the President the important events of the week. It contained the information, for instance, that in one battle Vietcong machine-gunners had been found dead manacled to their weapons. Lodge also reported that he had had lunch with some elements of the First Cavalry Division and that one soldier had told him he found it easier to understand the draft-card burners than the prominent men who seemed willing to carry on the debate at home interminably.

The cable also expressed the concern of the American community in Saigon that this is "the only war we've fought in this century where important men kept flailing policy after it has been debated and decided."

Mr. Johnson spoke sadly about some of the opposition. Senator Fulbright and the others, some of the strongest critics, he noted, had voted for the SEATO treaty—under the provisions of which the United States defends the legacy of its presence in Vietnam. Mr. Johnson and John F. Kennedy had been ill at the time the treaty was before the Senate, although

the President remarked that he would have voted for it. "I didn't make this contract," he said, "but I intend to keep it."

He told me how he had gone to Congress for the resolution of support in August, 1964, informing the lawmakers that "he wanted them in on the take-off as well as the landing." He explained how he had helped give President Eisenhower a similar resolution to protect Taiwan. He continued calmly: "We inherited this involvement, this commitment, and we are there. I want Congress to go with us." The Communists need to know where we stand.

I asked: Mr. President, how do you account for the opposition to the fighting—Senatorial and otherwise? He replied that there is a strong strain of "cultural alienation" in it, by which he means a feeling that the Vietnamese "are not our kind of people, that they're an ancient people unconcerned with change and reform, that they are so different from us that it would be impossible for us to help them.

"You may think this is begging your question, but I have heard this from the most pronounced critics of our policy. They write off Asia and say: 'Concentrate on Europe. Our destinies are inseparable. Our customs are common.'

"These people may be sincere, but I believe they are wrong. They ignore the fact that the desire to be independent is as color-blind as aggression. They think the hope of catching up with the times is American—or European—exclusively. What we're fighting for is not European or Asian or American—it's basic to man's nature everywhere. We want to give peaceful change a chance to work in Asia as it has in Europe." (At one point, the President said to me, in obvious sorrow, that India may lose as many people by starvation this year as the entire population of Vietnam.)

Mr. Johnson reverted to the subject of the Senate hearings. The Senators came up with "no alternative plan, no alternative program." They could have recommended that we withdraw, that we accept the enclave idea, that we bomb North Vietnam harder, or that we strike China with nuclear weapons. But their main point was, "We're going to get into a war with China." As if they were the only ones who had given any thought to the difficulties we face out there!

The President anticipated the question I had next in

mind—What are the chances that China will come in?—for he spoke it and answered it: "I don't think anybody knows. I'm no expert. Of course, if we spit in her face, that's one thing; but if we don't, most experts don't believe she will want to get involved that way. In the meantime, though, what are we supposed to do—lie paralyzed in fear? That is what they [the Communists] would like us to do."

Now the President referred to what the public-opinion polls show. A solid 10 per cent, he explained, "are hotheads—Gold-water types"; 10 per cent "are ready to run." "We can never change their minds—and it's a mistake to think we can. Every concession we have made to the critics has been met with another demand and—they will never be satisfied. I have listened to them patiently: now I have to prosecute our policies to the best of my ability, hoping they will realize what is at stake."

This led him again to pose a question and to answer it: "When is it going to be over?"

"When Churchill said we shall fight on the beaches, and in the streets, he did not say when it would be over. When the aggressor changes his mind, it will be over—but not before—not unless the American people succumb to the temptation to take the easy way out. I can't say when this will be over—I would have to take the Fifth Amendment if asked to answer that one precisely," he quipped.

But the President tried to answer the question for me, anyway. He said General Westmoreland is more optimistic. The North Vietnamese casualties are very heavy. The defections are doubling—"averaging 1,700 a month, with 2,000 this month." "After the Alamo, no one thought Sam Houston would wind up so quick," he said in an aside. And then he mused, "Who knows how long, how much?" The important thing is: Are we right or wrong? "I believe we are right."

I broke in to ask him to tell me about the new phase of the war. His face lit up spontaneously. The war is two-pronged, he said. He made two fists. He thrust one forward signifying the military side and then the other signifying the economic and social side. This was the side he plainly *wanted* to talk about. He said proudly: "I want to leave the footprints of America there. I want them to say, 'This is what the Americans

left—schools and hospitals and dams.” Shortly afterward, he said: “We can turn the Mekong into a Tennessee Valley.”

The President talked of the income of the Vietnamese as “\$65 a year,” and of how they need schools, health measures and agricultural assistance. “We can teach them to read and write,” he said with elation. He explained that we are trying to introduce television in Vietnam. He said the domestic help at Lodge’s quarters were wide-eyed in amazement when they first saw TV, beamed from a plane. He rose out of his chair, his own eyes wide and with his arms raised to illustrate how amazed they probably had looked. Then he said softly: “I remember the first time I heard radio.”

The President continued. He said he was asking Ambassador William Porter to be in the economic and social field a counterpart to General Westmoreland. The work of uplifting South Vietnam, he said, is “tough.” “You build schools and hospitals and the Communists tear them down. That is just one more reason I get so frustrated when people charge that we should be more sympathetic to the Vietcong. What has happened to American liberalism that it would ignore such tactics? There are times when it seems the Vietcong have more negotiators in their behalf than our soldiers do.”

As to the Vietcong in negotiations, Mr. Johnson said soberly: “We’ll work out a way for them to be heard—if Hanoi will let them—or if they want to. But history makes it clear that when you bring the Communists in, they can chew you up if you are not as smart or as prepared as they are.”

Mr. Johnson shifted now to his impressions of Premier Ky, Ky, the President said with delight, “sounded like Rex Tugwell.”* I asked him what he meant, and he recalled that Tugwell in the early days of the New Deal had said that we must “roll up our sleeves and remake America.” Ky, in the President’s opinion, “is talking like Tugwell—we’re hoping he can perform like Tugwell.”

As for the South Vietnamese people: “They have 700,000 men fighting. We’re not giving them up.” He insisted: “We’re fighting for a special objective. We don’t want to destroy

*Rexford G. Tugwell, one of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Brain Trustees and later Governor of Puerto Rico, helped to frame the Agricultural Adjustment Act.

China or North Vietnam. We just want to have them leave these people alone.”

To illustrate, he reminded himself of how, years ago, Huey Long had gone into Arkansas to campaign for Hattie Caraway for the Senate.* He told the story with zest and in lively detail, reminding us that the only thing Long wanted to do was “just to protect this poor little helpless woman from those powerful interests arrayed against her.”

Mr. Johnson returned to the matter of our strategy. Our aim in bombing, he said, is “not to destroy or kill civilians but simply to stop Hanoi from bringing the stuff down into the South.” He said he had been advised by General Eisenhower to let the Communists know there are no sanctuaries from which aggression can be directed.

And, again, Mr. Johnson repeated his main idea: “They” must stop their aggression. “If they’ll go home tomorrow, we’ll come home.”

*Hattie Caraway, the first woman U.S. Senator, was appointed to her late husband’s seat in 1931. She won her first full term in 1933 by defeating six male opponents in the Democratic primary, with the support of both F.D.R., then Presidential candidate, and Senator Huey Long, the Louisiana Kingfish, father of Senator Russell Long. She was defeated in the 1944 primary by Senator J. W. Fulbright.

PV4867
.R45
2000

REPORTING VIETNAM

AMERICAN JOURNALISM 1959-1975

Introduction by Ward Just



THE LIBRARY OF AMERICA

Volume compilation, Foreword, Introduction, notes, and chronology
copyright © 1998, 2000 by Literary Classics of the United States, Inc.,
New York, N.Y. All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced commercially
by offset-lithographic or equivalent copying devices without
the permission of the publisher.

The material in this volume is reprinted with permission of
the holders of copyright and publication rights.
Acknowledgments are on pages 808-12.

Distributed to the trade in the United States
by Penguin Putnam Inc.
and in Canada by Penguin Books Canada Ltd.

Library of Congress Catalog Number: 99-039744
For cataloging information, see end of Index.

ISBN 1-883011-90-6

Text design by Bruce Campbell.
Cover design by R. D. Scudellari.
Calligraphy by Gun Larson.

Cover photo: Neil Sheehan, by Francois Sully; courtesy Archives and
Special Collections, Healey Library, University of Massachusetts/Boston.

This one-volume selection is drawn from *Reporting Vietnam*,
a two-volume hardcover set published by
The Library of America in 1998.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Advisory board for *Reporting Vietnam*

MILTON J. BATES
LAWRENCE LICHTY
PAUL L. MILES
RONALD H. SPECTOR
MARILYN YOUNG