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The Barometer

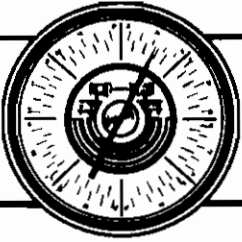
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THE BAROMETER

(Lt. Comdr. R.H. Hoffman, USNR-R, comments on Capt. Wesley K. Clark's article "The Best and the Brightest: a Critique" which appeared in the July-August issue.)

In the July-August issue of the *Review*, Capt. Wesley K. Clark wrote a stimulating, provocative, balanced, and yet strangely ambivalent critique of *The Best and the Brightest*. It was a classic case of the "yes--but" approach. Captain Clark seems genuinely impressed by Mr. Halberstam's efforts, which he calls "... a prodigious effort to provide a new dimension to our understanding of American policy in Southeast Asia..." He then, however, goes on to conclude that the book "is not a compelling or complete account of the bureaucratic politics of involvement." His first criticism is the lack of footnotes and adequate source citation. It seems that Captain Clark feels that he (or at least the Army) has been indicted, and, in order to prepare his defense brief, he needs to know the evidence. It is easy to understand the sensitivity of the military and political establishments to any in-depth analysis of their respective roles in Vietnam, but the point which Halberstam makes repeatedly is that in the early sixties there was no question as to the validity of our assumptions, NO opposition to our commitment in Vietnam to "contain" communism. Not only did the politicians and the military assume that this was our role, the Nation as a whole did too. Captain Clark extensively quotes Halberstam on this but then states that Halberstam never explicitly states what these

assumptions were. In this assertion, I believe Captain Clark is wrong. The very next sentence after the close of the quotation which he cites reads: "There was no real attempt, when the new Administration came in, to analyze Ho Chi Minh's position in terms of the Vietnamese people and in terms of the larger Communist world, to establish what Diem represented, to determine whether the domino theory was in fact valid."

The above are, I submit, the very real assumptions upon which our Southeast Asia policy was based and which were never reexamined. The military should be particularly sympathetic to this criticism of Halberstam's. No general, taking over a new command, would blindly accept the troop dispositions made by his predecessor.

While not reexamining these basic assumptions was in retrospect a very real failure, that is not to say that even if the assumptions had been thoroughly reexamined there would have been any change in our policy. Given the existing climate of opinion, I seriously doubt it. This is perhaps the core lesson to be learned by everyone; the utter folly of continuing the same policy year after year without undertaking periodic, critical reviews of that policy.

One very serious charge which Halberstam does allege, and which no one to my knowledge has ever denied, was that MACV either systematically excluded or deliberately withheld the reports from its senior military advisers which accurately reported the failings of the Vietnamese Government and troops.

Military theory has always demanded that a commander have as complete and accurate a picture of the strategic and tactical picture as possible. Yet this basic precept was violated time after time at the highest field command levels. While this was inexcusable, it does not mean that these officers were villains. They simply were human beings with all the frailties, shortcomings, and ability to make mistakes which any human being has.

There is a philosophical dictum that man never knowingly does evil. That whatever he does, at the moment he does it, he perceives as being good. If there was a "sin" here, it was the sin of pride—a pride which drove them to believe that there was no assignment, no matter how unrealistic, which they could not carry out.

The political establishment had set the goal: contain communism by saving Vietnam. They had made the military the means by which this goal would be achieved. The fact that Vietnam could be saved only by political means was acknowledged in theory but ignored in reality. The military was therefore placed in an impossible situation. Unfortunately, they chose to pretend that the mission was being accomplished by military means. What is even more ironic is that at this very time Army doctrine was teaching that military means could never achieve political goals.

In 1961 I spent my 2 weeks of Naval Reserve active duty at the Army Special Forces Center. The doctrine being taught at that time in the Counter-Guerrilla Section was that insurgency was basically a political problem and could be countered only by political measures, measures that had to be undertaken by the indigenous government. The critical point was that a foreign power could never win for the host government. The foreign (or third) power could provide advice, material, and support but could never provide the one indispensable element necessary for

victory: confidence of the people in their own government.

A brief review of the press reports of the early sixties reveals a great interest in "counterinsurgency." Gradually this phrase drops out of use and is replaced by "conventional war." Could it be that it was realized that if indeed this was an insurgency then we could never win, only the Vietnamese could and that seemed unlikely. However, if this could be considered a "conventional war" then maybe we could win—in spite of our allies.

The lesson to be learned from *The Best and the Brightest*, as I believe Captain Clark agrees, is the impact and influence which individuals have upon events. Hopefully, gone forever is the concept of the "government" as a nameless, faceless, amorphous mass; some disembodied intellect which turns out decisions that no mere mortal citizen may question. If this is believed, and understood, we will all be the better for it. Government is people. Wise people, foolish people; people with reason, people with feeling, people with passions.

The military will have a vital role to play in the formation and implementation of U.S. foreign policy for decades to come. It is useless to believe that the creditability of the military has not been damaged by Vietnam. Theodore White summarized the feelings of the people when he wrote¹

Vietnam had been explained to them | the American people | first as a war in a high cause where, with the investment of several battalions of American troops, a quick mop-up could be effected in a few months against ragged guerrillas—and with a few more troops, the war would be over by Christmas . . . 1965, 1966, 1967.

¹Theodore White, *The Making of the President: 1972* (New York: Atheneum, 1973), p. 394.

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The creditability of the political establishment was damaged even more. There is no need to recall the revenge which the Americans took upon their political leaders. The political establishment has gone on from Vietnam to reestablish itself in the people's eyes by its actions in other areas and in new situations. In an institutional sense, the political establishment has written off Vietnam and is no longer concerned, or obsessed, with defending its role against all comers.

It is in this light that the final paragraph of Captain Clark's article came as such a shock to me. It was so totally out of character with the rest of the article. What had been a well balanced, rational, perceptive criticism was ended on a strident note of compulsive defensiveness. I cannot help but wonder if this was not "tacked on" as a prudent genuflection toward the existing military power structure which seems unable or unwilling to consider it could ever err. The confidence which the American people had in their military after World War II has gone. It may return. But that return of confidence will have to be earned. For the Military Establishment to simply ignore criticism and think that they can demand the confidence and support of the people is blindness of the first order and a small service to themselves, their services, or the Nation.

(The Office of the Commander, Navy Recruiting Command, comments on Professor Felix Moos' article "History and Culture: Some Thoughts on the United States All-Volunteer Force" which appeared in the July-August issue.)

The views of Professor Felix Moos concerning the U.S. All-Volunteer Force (AVF) present a very parochial and pessimistic picture which seems concerned only with the many problems confronting the AVF rather than of

tions on how it can be successfully implemented. In essence, he finds many ills but offers no cures. Although the zero draft is a reality the AVF is far from it, and any constructive criticism against AVF or praise for it is far too premature.

The rationale behind many of his assertions tends to be based purely from a historical standpoint, with the general contention that all elements of society have advanced throughout history except the military. For example, the theory that the AVF may lead to an alienation of the Officer Corps from society and with it a possible coup d'état appears based purely on the concept that since it happened in the past it invariably must happen again. Also, the allegations that AVF members would not be willing to fight whereas a draftee would or that the AVF will lead to the creation of a "military mentality" are also completely unfounded.

The one important fact that apparently escaped Professor Moos concerns the planned mission and tasks of the AVF. This misconception is accentuated by the claim that the AVF's implementation will amount to a "concept hitherto alien to Americans—of one man's money for another man's blood." As we know, the AVF is envisioned as a standing force only, backed by a closely interwoven Ready Reserve, both of which would be supplemented by "total mobilization" in time of national emergency. It is not designed as an offensive "war machine" destined to fight on farflung battlefields for the "wealthy and intellectuals" as he would lead us to believe.

There is a strong possibility that the AVF will, as it actively competes with civilian industry, indeed become an expensive proposition. This is an irreversible economic fact and is something we will have to live with. However, the military budget will not be the only thing feeling the "sting of inflation."

Therefore, it cannot be fairly surmised that since the AVF will be "expensive" it is doomed to failure.

As regards the Navy's role in the AVF, the Navy has almost always been a volunteer service, and men motivated to the voluntary service of their country would appear superior to the conscript in many ways. We have recently made

great strides in improving Navy life and in making service in the Navy more meaningful. By continuing these service-life improvements and by stressing the advantages of Navy training, education, and experience we will be able to recruit the quality personnel required to man our modern fleet—the Volunteer Navy can and will indeed become a reality.



Opinions founded on prejudice are always sustained with the greatest violence.

Francis Jeffrey