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Nation's lead

View from Capitol Hill

The growing danger in Vietnam, the obvious escalation, and the increased commitment of U.S. troops have brought a new wave of anxiety to Congress. In a real sense, the various Congressional opinion leaders are confused about just what is going on among themselves; they support the President almost to the man, and they are backbiting among themselves.

At the same time, there were open attempts this week to influence the President's action in Vietnam -- one element maneuvering to limit the escalation of the war, another to force the escalation into a different direction. Those in the know hesitated to speak entirely bluntly about the facts of Vietnam and the realities of Lyndon Johnson's new policy in using U.S. ground forces in combat.

Most fascinating was the splitting away of the House Republicans from straight down-the-line support of Lyndon Johnson's Vietnam policy -- which put them at odds also with the Senate Republicans.
Almost equally fascinating was a major speech on Vietnam by William Fulbright, Chairman of Senate Foreign Relations Committee, in full support of Johnson's shipment of those new troops to Vietnam.

Fulbright acted — after a long silence — to help out the President, whom Fulbright has found in almost morose anxiety himself about the worsening Vietnam situation.

The revelation of the testiness of the House Republicans was almost accidental. Last Friday, Mel Laird of Wisconsin, Chairman of the House Republican conference (caucus), had his usual weekly interview with AP's Wisconsin regional man, Dick Powers. He talked about Vietnam and Power's story picked up some play.

As a result, Laird decided to put together in a formal statement the essentials of what he had said in the AP interview. Those views reflected the views of Jerry Ford, the GOP leader, who approves them, and the key men in the House Republican hierarchy.
"We may be dangerously close to ending any Republican support of our present Vietnam policy," Laird's statement open provocatively. "This possibility exists because the American people do not know how far the Administration is prepared to go with large-scale use of ground forces in order to save face in Vietnam."

Laird, who is ranking Republican on the defense appropriations subcommittee in the House, has pretty full intelligence on just what is happening -- primarily from Pentagon military sources -- as does Jerry Ford. Laird and Ford know for example not only that the sites are under construction for the Russian ground to air missiles, but that the military has recommended knocking them out now before the missiles are in place, and that the civilian leaders have rejected that recommendation. They are familiar with the intentions of the LBJ policy and the numbers of troops he is planning to send into Vietnam -- more than 100,000.

But because these plans have not been publicly revealed, both Laird and Ford feel required to speak obliquely about them -- thus Laird's security-conscious lack of candor on policy in his statement.
Laird is worried about the LBJ assumption that the administration is following out the Eisenhower commitment in Vietnam; that is, of using Ike and Dulles as a cover to justify the increase of troops in Vietnam. He is also worried about the strategy's effectiveness. He and his House Republicans would prefer to avoid land commitments and instead increase the tempo of air strikes.

"In several public utterances," Laird said in his statement, "Administration spokesmen have implied that ground force build-up in Vietnam is Eisenhower or Republican policy. Such an implication is just the opposite of the truth."

He maintained that the Ike-Dulles policy "scrupulously" avoided large-scale commitment of ground forces in Southeast Asia. The Johnson administration has rejected ground help from South Korea, Formosa and Thailand.

"Today," said Laird, "thousands of American boys are fighting a war and many are losing their lives because the United States government has failed on occasion after occasion to make the right decision at the right time...."

He suggested retargeting U.S. air strikes at "more significant targets in North Vietnam" and he proposed the port city of Haiphong as an appropriate target.
Laird's speech caused considerable consternation on Capitol Hill, and interestingly enough, part of that consternation was simply the lack of communications among top Republican leaders. Senator Dirksen, for example, who disagreed with Laird's main thrust, didn't know whether Laird was speaking for himself, the House Republican leadership, or the House Republicans (on the basis of a party caucus.)

Laird spoke on his own -- but his views reflected those of Ford and other key House Republicans and that makes his statement of far greater consequence than was immediately assumed. For the fact is that the House GOP leaders are gravely distressed -- and annoyed -- at Johnson's present policies.

"We still support the administration," Laird said privately, in explaining his intent on the Vietnam statement. "But there are serious questions in our minds on this ground build up. There's a question whether we will support this ground build up as the proper means of escalation."

Laird questions, as does Ford and Glen Lipscomb, whether ground forces build-up is the way to produce negotiation. He and his colleagues assume there are only two alternatives in Vietnam since the President's offer to negotiate in that Baltimore speech in April: negotiate or
withdraw. The Baltimore speech eliminated the third alternative of pushing for a military victory.

The House Republicans believe that it is on the ground alone where the Vietcong -- and China -- are stronger than the U.S. Thus, to meet them on their own terms, To Laird, is not the way to encourage negotiations.

"This idea that we are not going after their significant targets with our air strikes is questionable," Laird said. "I'm not talking about Hanoi. I'm not talking about vast population areas."

Ford agrees with Laird across the board (although he wished Laird had not used quite such provocative headline-grabbing language suggesting the Republicans would pull off their support of LBJ in Vietnam.)

"All the Republicans I know," Ford said privately, "believe a firm policy is mandatory, but we believe that the emphasis should be on air and sea use by the U.S. without a buildup in Southeast Asia of ground forces." Ford would like to see the Administration encouraging a buildup of land forces from the Philippines, Korea, Formosa, and Australia.
Not only do the House Republicans question the efficacy of the new LBJ land-forces buildup, but they are also smarting from the failure of the President to consult with the minority leadership in this key decision. They have been at the White House in three weeks; they have not been officially (only secretly) informed of the new policy.

"If they are going in with forces of this magnitude," Ford said, "This is a major change -- without consultations. If we are going to have this kind of change, we in the minority ought to be given the opportunity to listen to the military people, to make suggestions -- and to disagree. The President has got to bring us in at the start -- not half-way down the trail -- if he is going to have our full support."

"We do not want to make the decisions on what units do what -- or where the air strikes ought to be. But overall strategy is a different matter."

But in the Senate, there is no such skepticism or criticism of the President's policy among the Republican leaders.
Dirksen was first shown a report on McNamara's Wednesday announcement that the U.S. was sending in another 20,000 men. Dirksen read it. "Good for him," he said. "I approve what the President is doing," he added.

Laird's views -- and Ford's -- have not been taken up by the joint congressional GOP leadership; that is, with the Senate GOP leaders. Dirksen frankly couldn't quite understand what Laird was up to. He suggested several reasons off the record why Laird might have released the statement, but he simply did not know the reality. None of the House leaders had called Dirksen on it, and that left Dirksen somewhat at sea about Laird's maneuver. But flatly and unequivocally, Dirksen totally supports Johnson now in Vietnam.

"He is the commander in chief," Dirksen said.

Dirksen does not understand and does not share the skepticism or the criticism of his House colleagues against the LBJ strategy.

"Lyndon Johnson is no damn fool," said Dirksen privately. "It is unimaginable that he would take a step that had not been approved by Taylor and McNamara, the joint chiefs of staff and the secretary of state. He's not wild to undertake a decision that flew in the face of the best military brains."
Johnson got just as much support from Tommy Kuchel, the Senate GOP whip. "In the senate republican group," said Kuchel, "there is no question but that we agree that it's unthinkable for the united states to abandon its efforts to protect the integrity of south Vietnam. The Republicans in the Senate have encouraged the administration not only to maintain a policy of firmness, but to exert the maximum leadership in finding a means at which peaceful negotiations may be undertaken.

"This deadly serious question is not partisan at all," Kuchel went on. "Our successes or our failures will affect all of us together."

Kuchel took a hostile view to Laird's statement and the position of the House GOP leaders.

"The defensive arrangements, the sorties to the North," Kuchel said, "are not matters to be determined by members of the legislative branch -- and they ought not to be."

Thus, the Republicans are divided, although they don't mean to be, and Laird himself privately insists he never intends to rough up any Republicans -- only Democrats.
The House Republicans are clearly dissatisfied with the way Johnson has been handling them -- that lack of consultation on a major shift in Vietnam policy that could involved the U.S. in another Korea-like bloodbath. They accept the alternatives -- negotiate or withdraw -- and favor, of course, the negotiations, although many of them, including Laird, would have preferred the third alternative: military victory. But they question the strategy of using U.S. ground troops against the Vietcong in combat. They want to belt the Vietcong and north Vietnam increasingly from the air and the sea, and to use air-sea power to drive Hanoi to the bargaining table. They are positioned perfectly to raise unshirted hell when those large casualty lists start coming in -- if they do, which seems increasingly more likely.

Laird's statement, however, reflects only the House wing of the party, not the Senate. In the Senate, the key Republican in Congress -- Ev Dirksen -- stands four-square for his old pal LBJ, and it will be impossible to mount a major GOP assault against Johnson with him standing in the way. The House-Republican sniping will be annoying -- and there is more coming -- but it will
not be a truly partisan issue as long as Dirksen keeps saying: "He's the commander in chief."

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