

NORFOLK (Va.)
VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Circ.: m. 107,809
S. 140,020

Front Edit Other
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APR 27 1961
Date

The Mood in Washington

Washington.

If one word could describe the attitude and mood of official leadership in Washington this past week it would probably be "sombre."

No one in a position of heavy responsibility denied—indeed, he was more likely to proclaim—the seriousness of problems around the world. "Crisis" was a frequent word. "Living with crisis" was called the common experience. "Extreme" is an adjective people liked to place before hard nouns.

The words suggest the mood of men who have taken stiff blows in recent days. Distant Laos in one direction and the distant Congo in the other conform to no traditional pattern and yield to no standard remedy. Because Laos is in the path of Sino-Soviet aggression and the Congo is in the midst of a score of new, immature, unorganized, volatile nations in varying states of transition, each connoted dangerous possibilities far beyond its own immediate issues and its own borders.

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The Cuban bubble burst on troubled minds as well as on bitter shores and with bitter disappointments. The shock was immense. Many men, it is now possible to say, participated in these decisions, including men of long military experience. Little or nothing happened as they assumed it would. The dismay of mistake possessed the capital, and then the blunt questions came roaring in. How could such errors be made? Why the obvious ignorance? What kind of planning was this?

This was the moment when the four generals rose up in Algeria and in a twinkling possessed Algiers and Oran, and — who could tell? — perhaps the greater part of the French army in being. The dispatches reported fears of invasion of metropolitan France, and de Gaulle went to the country with the old Gallic appeals to heart and soul and personal leadership.

To Washington leaders still under the Cuban shock this seemed almost too much. France stands at the center of Western Europe. It is a foundation of NATO. If France was in danger of overturn, if to men in Moscow things seemed to be going well in Asia and Africa, and obviously in Cuba, and possibly therefore throughout Latin America

would these men be tempted into going further for greater gambles toward a goal they have announced many times?

The hammer-beat of such events and such potentials—so alien to the green sweeps and the spring colors of Washington in April, when the White House grounds never looked lovelier and the tourists from everywhere swarmed, climbed, and swept over everything—this hammer-beat shook the new administration as nothing else has in experience or in contemplation. The flowers of Washington are immemorably gay, but the thoughts of men in high posts were as sombre as Washington has known in such men in years.

The ways in which President Kennedy and Secretary Rusk responded to these pressures is now a part of contemporary history. Their concern—their extreme concern, their extreme seriousness — was unmistakable. To newspapermen in Washington for annual meetings they presented serious words and some weariness of body but none of spirit.

Mr. Kennedy's address to the American Society of Newspaper Editors last week blinked nothing, dodged nothing, and was full of drive and purpose. It left some questions unanswered. But they were not questions of spirit. The President seemed, on the contrary, to be rising to new resolution and to new methods of dealing with the foe. His refusal to blame others, his insistence that the responsibility is his, encourage men who know somebody erred.

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Mr. Rusk is less dynamic but looks, talks, and behaves like a steady, poised, undaunted, determined, very human and yet very professional intelligence. When he gets down to cases, his clarity, directness, and frankness are reassuring. Each is a hard-driven man these days, but in different ways characteristic of different men their rebound is plain to see.

Yet to sources within the reach of newspapermen the possibility for relief for Washington, or the country, or the world, is not prom-

ture today than then, and Washington will be grateful for that change. The Congo sometimes looks better, sometimes worse, and is certainly not settled. Laos seems worse. Yet to men who should know, Laos, bad though it appears, is not the source of greatest concern in southeast Asia — Vietnam is.

These men look for no change in Moscow. They see no gain from disarmament conversations in Geneva. They will not be shocked if a Soviet move aims at a Middle Eastern target before the year is out, and they expect Moscow to raise the Berlin issue again and vigorously. They think a world in transition is a sore temptation for the Kremlin, and they count the next few years—the next five, and perhaps the next ten — critical. Beyond that they hope for new influences.

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One new factor such men try to measure is the relation of China and the Soviet Union. They know the relation between the two has frequently been strained. They foresee more Chinese attempts to spread out beyond present borders in the historical way of the Chinese when they are strong—nationalism at work rather than communism. They think Communist China will have nuclear weapons of her own making before much longer, and they would rather expect that, behind the cover of such arms, the Chinese will try to move in one direction or another. Over the long range such men think the Sino-Soviet partnership is so incompatible as to be impossible.

But for immediate purposes there is the need of understanding the mistakes of the Cuban expedition, and whether it includes the CIA and to what extent American military leadership. For the answers the American government is counting first on the inquiries led by re-mobilized General Maxwell Taylor. The Latin American reaction, as disclosed thus far, has been the bright spot on the scene. The signs of alarm to the south at the spectacle of a foreign imperialism dominant over a country of the Western Hemisphere are an unexpected dividend. But it does not salve the bitterness over Cuba and the necessity of preventing, from now on, such fiascos in a world that won't brook failure.



Rusk