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## Fulbright's Role As Sober Critic

By Marquis Childs

HE SITS HUNCHED over his big desk, stacks of books at either end, his glasses slipping down the bridge of his nose. Sen. J. William Fulbright, looking rather like a bemused college professor, is the least likely candidate one could imagine for embattled leader of the opposition on the highly emotional issue of Vietnam.

Whatever the public image, and from time to time Fulbright has managed to arouse the ire of almost every organized group in the country, this is not how the Senator sees himself. He believes in a sober examination of the realities, which is what, as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he considers the goal of the hearings on Vietnam and China.

The hearings were widely reported but Fulbright, who can never be charged with being a cheery optimist, shakes his head sadly as he says that he cannot see that they had much effect on public opinion. In this he finds himself in agreement with President Johnson who noted that the stock of Vietnam critics seeking a way out of the war had not risen in opinion polls. In the course of the same talk the President referred to Fulbright as a scholar, a more complimentary term than other Presidents have used.

For the crisis of the Vietnam war and for the Senator who has been the most consistent critic of Administration policy this is a kind of halfway point. The China hearings are in suspension if not concluded as the pressures to expand the war are growing.

FULBRIGHT is frank to admit that at this stage he sees no way to check the forces set in such seemingly unrelenting motion. The one court of appeal is the President. So far as Johnson and the Senator are concerned it looks like the irresistible force meeting the immovable object.

They have talked together, the President in their last meeting urging the Senator to meet with Secretary of State Dean Rusk. For Fulbright this sounds like a prescription to agree with Rusk. That is, of course, the great divide, with the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee differing more sharply over Rusk's definition of America's world-

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responsibility to contain communism than on Vietnam.

The weakness of the position of those who, like Fulbright, seek a de-escalation of the war is their alternative. They are not for scuttle and run despite the calculated campaign to pin that label on them. This leaves the envelope strategy of General Matthew Ridgway and James L. Gavin, a holding operation meaning eventual disengagement. It would not necessarily be a static operation, since Vietnamese-American units could move out from the coastal cities to keep the Vietcong off balance.

With this as his alternative Fulbright realizes that the President is the court of last appeal. He wants to talk with him again. But he is aware of how time is running out as the pressure to bomb Hanoi and Haiphong builds up.

WHAT profoundly concerns him, as a humanitarian and a scholar, is the apparent willingness to sacrifice civilian lives in a bombing drive that could, if the war escalates, extend to China's millions. And he asks the question: How can a supposedly civilized people fail to rise up and demand that such inordinate cruelty stop?

When Karl Meyer in 1963 brought out an impressive collection of Fulbright's speeches and statements, with the subtitle "The Public Positions of a Private Thinker," the consistency of his stand in his more than 20 years in Congress was clear. In his memorandum on the Bay of Pigs invasion he raised the only major voice against that hapless Cuban misadventure. Later in 1961 in a speech on Southeast Asia he said:

"What these voices (opposing any political settlement in Laos) are saying is that the United States is the strongest country in the world and should not hesitate to commit its strength to the active defense of its policies anywhere outside the Communist empire. This is dangerous doctrine; nothing would please Communist leaders more than to draw the United States into costly commitments of its resources in peripheral struggles in which the principal Communist powers are not themselves involved."

It is hard to put a charge of ambition against Fulbright. Liberals invariably fault him for failing to take a stand on civil rights, which is one reason he could never be Secretary of State. Yet as a private thinker he promises to go on taking public positions.

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