

# UNDER THE VENEER: NIXON'S VIETNAM SPEECH OF NOVEMBER 3, 1969

Robert P. Newman

WITH the political honeymoon over, with his Congressional critics nipping at his heels and threatening full-scale attacks, and with a major outpouring of antiwar sentiment probable on the October 15 Moratorium, Richard M. Nixon announced, on October 13, 1969, that he would make a major address about Vietnam November 3. The advance notice was unusually long for presidential addresses; the stakes in the burgeoning combat were unusually high. Vietnam had broken his predecessor, and Richard Nixon did not care to let himself in for the same treatment.

Part of the tension in October was due to the President's earlier incautious remark that he would not allow his program to be influenced by demonstrations in the streets. This gratuitous irritant to the peace forces guaranteed a massive turnout for the October 15 Moratorium, and it was partially to defuse the Moratorium that the President announced his speech so early. In this effort, the early announcement was perhaps successful; the size of the October 15 turnout remained impressive, but its tone was muted. All but the most violent of the protesters cushioned their stance with an anticipation that on November 3, when the President could speak without appearing to have yielded to pressure, he would announce major steps to end the war.

Even after the Moratorium, announcement of the coming address had its

effect on the peace movement. From October 15 until Nixon spoke, plans for the November antiwar events were affected by anticipation of the Presidential speech. Had the prognosis for the November 3 speech been unfavorable, the peace forces would have strained every nerve to mount their greatest effort in mid-November. But Presidential aides let it be known that Nixon had attended to the Moratorium, even though he did not approve it, and the Washington gossip mills were rife with predictions that, on November 3, the President would produce good news for peace. For two weeks, the doves relaxed. Perhaps, thought many, Nixon has really got the word, and the November push won't be necessary after all.

Every channel of public intelligence built up the significance of the November 3 effort. The President was known to be "almost totally preoccupied" with drafting the speech during the last two weeks of October.<sup>1</sup> Whether in the White House, at Camp David, or on the road, he was writing, revising, reflecting. The speech had to "convey an authentic note of personal involvement," rather than appear as a run-of-the-mill ghost-written production; and for this reason, all ten drafts were pristine Nixon. Ray Price, one of the President's top writers, had no idea what was in it: "I contributed nothing—not even a flourish."<sup>2</sup> Evans and Novak, executive-watchers of more

*Mr. Newman is Professor of Speech at the University of Pittsburgh.*

<sup>1</sup> Robert B. Semple, Jr., "Speech Took 10 Drafts, And President Wrote All," *The New York Times*, November 4, 1969, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

than usual competence, noted on the day of the speech: "In stark contrast to his last major speech on Vietnam, almost six months ago, Mr. Nixon's talk tonight has been written by one hand alone—the President's hand."<sup>3</sup>

Buildup? On the night of November 3, Caesar himself could not have upstaged Richard Nixon.

In retrospect, expectations were so high that not even the Sermon on the Mount could have fulfilled them. The President had focused the spotlight so long and so carefully that only rhetorical perfection would have been equal to the occasion.

#### THE BACKGROUND

One of the first questions to be raised about a major address by Nixon, who for years was dogged with the nickname "Tricky Dick," would be "Is he sincere?" Nixon did not survive the political wars by the simple-minded morality of a country parson. He had scuttled Helen Gahagan Douglas, done in Alger Hiss, run interference for Eisenhower, fought Jack Kennedy to a virtual draw, and outlasted Barry Goldwater. He is a politician, which is to say that he has run a gauntlet the parameters of which are set, not by the Marquis of Queensberry, but by the necessities of survival.<sup>4</sup> From such an old pol, some temporizing might be expected.

When, therefore, he claimed, on November 3, to have a plan for peace, which he must unfortunately keep secret due to the perverseness of the enemy, some scepticism was expressed. Did he mean it? Did he really have a secret plan? Did

he intend to close out the war, or was this just another maneuver to justify the same old business?

The reaction of the peace forces was largely predictable. Few were more blunt than Nixon's erstwhile nemesis, Senator Kennedy, as quoted by the *Times*:

I do not wish to be harsh nor overly critical, but the time has come to say it: as a candidate, Richard Nixon promised us a plan for peace once elected; as chief executive, President Nixon promised us a plan for peace for the last 10 months. Last night he spoke again of a plan—a secret plan for peace sometime. There now must be doubt whether there is in existence any plan to extricate America from this war in the best interest of America—for it is no plan to say that what we do depends upon what Hanoi does.<sup>5</sup>

But when it comes to judging the President's sincerity, by all the canons of truth, Mansfield of Montana and Fulbright of Arkansas are superior judges. After five years of dealing with LBJ, they can be counted on to smell a fraud. Both want rapid withdrawal from Vietnam. Both have registered profound opposition to the course of the war. When, after conferences with the President, and caveats about the pace of withdrawal, they nonetheless acknowledge that the President does intend to get out, one must believe them. Both want withdrawal to be programmed independently of what Hanoi does, but both accept as genuine the President's wish to wind down the war.<sup>6</sup>

Were the testimony of the two leading Democratic Senators not conclusive, the ever-watchful White House press contingent, and the major liberal columnists,

<sup>5</sup> November 5, 1969, p. 10.

<sup>3</sup> Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Nixon's Appeal for Unity" (Baltimore) *News-American*, November 3, 1969, p. 7B.

<sup>4</sup> For a candid statement of the pressures operating on politicians, and the hard choices they make in the struggle for survival, see John F. Kennedy, *Profiles in Courage* (New York, 1956), ch. I.

<sup>6</sup> Mansfield has generally been more sympathetic to the President's position than Fulbright; the Majority Leader joined Minority Leader Hugh Scott in sponsoring a resolution expressing qualified support of the President on November 7. See UPI dispatch, "40 Senators Back Cease-Fire Plea," *The New York Times*, November 8, 1969, p. 10.

might be cited in their support. James Reston, whom I shall quote later on matters less favorable to Nixon's cause, regarded Nixon's sincerity as "almost terrifying."<sup>7</sup> And Richard Harwood and Laurence Stern of *The Washington Post* accept as true "that the President, a veteran of the Korean War settlement, is intent on liquidating the American involvement in Vietnam under a veneer of tough talk."<sup>8</sup> The veneer is highly visible, for all to see; but under it is the intention of winding down the American part of the war in Vietnam. What he said, he meant.

But what is the shape of his commitment to withdrawal? Has he now, after all these years of supporting the anti-communist effort in Indochina, decided that it was a mistake and that we *should* withdraw? Or is he merely bowing to political expediency, withdrawing because he can do no other and still retain power? An understanding both of his rhetoric and of his politics depends on answers to these questions.

There are those who maintain that the President is nonideological, a consummate politician and nothing more. This view is concisely expressed by Edwin Newman of NBC News: "But Mr. Nixon is as he is, and it is as well for him, and perhaps for the country, that he is so little ideological. He is neither embarrassed nor bound by having written in 1964 that the war in Vietnam was a life and death struggle in which victory was essential to the survival of freedom, and by having said in Saigon in April, 1967, that the great issue in 1968 would 'not be how to negotiate defeat but how to bring more pressure to bear for victory.'"<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> "Nixon's Mystifying Clarifications," *The New York Times*, November 5, 1969, p. 46.

<sup>8</sup> "Polls Show the 'Silent Majority' Also Is Uneasy About War Policy," *The Washington Post*, November 5, 1969, p. A19.

<sup>9</sup> "One Man Alone," *The New York Times Book Review*, November 23, 1969, p. 10.

There is indeed much evidence in Nixon's recent behavior to indicate that the anticommunist cold war ideology which he so powerfully embraced has now been modified: the SALT talks are underway with apparently serious intent; economic and travel restrictions applied to China for twenty years have been relaxed, and we are talking to the Chinese in Warsaw; germ warfare has been disavowed; and the military budget is, for the first time in years, on the way down. Does all this add up to a new Nixon, one who can willingly disengage from Vietnam?

Nixon's massive, sustained, vigorous hostility to Ho Chi Minh and his movement simply cannot be wiped out overnight. It was, after all, Nixon who as early as 1954 did his best to launch an American expeditionary force against Ho Chi Minh and in support of the French. On April 16, 1954, Nixon appeared for an off-the-record session before the American Society of Newspaper Editors, meeting in Washington, and said that "if France stopped fighting in Indo-China and the situation demanded it the United States would have to send troops to fight the Communists in that area."<sup>10</sup> This 1954 speech was the first sign that the battle to maintain a non-communist government in Saigon, whether of French colonials or of French-trained Vietnamese generals, was precisely Richard Nixon's battle. And consistently since, with no exceptions until the campaign of 1968, he has supported that battle.

One must approach the Nixon rhetoric, then, entertaining the hypothesis that he is disengaging reluctantly, that

<sup>10</sup> Luther A. Huston, "Asian Peril Cited; High Aide Says Troops May Be Sent if the French Withdraw," *The New York Times*, April 17, 1954, p. 1. Someone in Paris is alleged to have blown his cover, and Nixon was identified as the "High Aide" the next day. See also Bernard Fall, *Hell in a Very Small Place: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu* (New York, 1966), ch. IX.

his heart is not in it, that only the pressure of public opinion has caused him to embrace what he for fifteen years rejected. And one of the strong reasons for believing that the President does have a plan to phase out this war rapidly is the possibility that by late 1970 even the American Legion will be tired of fighting.

A second approach to understanding the President's speech lies in reflection on the various audiences to whom he was speaking.

There were at least three domestic audiences of consequence. First, his friends: the conservative Republicans who voted him into office and the Wallaceites he is now courting, largely a hawkish group, for whom he had the message, "Do not despair. I'm not heeding the demonstrators. We have to withdraw, but we don't have to give away a thing to the Viet Cong." Second, the "silent majority," some of whom had voted for him and some of whom had voted for Humphrey, many of them fence-straddlers on the war, all of them open, as Nixon saw it, to the plea, "I am winding down this war, but in a methodical and reasonable way which you ought to support." Third, the convinced doves, to whom he said, "Knock it off. I am the President, and disengaging from Vietnam is my bag. I respect your right to dissent, but don't carry it too far." In this latter group the youth, to whom he addressed a specific appeal, probably fit.

Abroad, he was concerned first with the South Vietnamese and other American client states: "We'll keep the faith, we won't desert you, and if the VC get tough again, we'll match them." There was also a clear word for Hanoi and other communist states: "You are going to have to come to terms with Thieu, or we will hang on forever; and if you escalate, the whole ball game is off."

One vital task of criticism is to decide which audience, and which message, was paramount. One is aided in making this decision by the recent publication of a startling book by a Nixon staffer, Kevin Phillips, an assistant to the Attorney General. In *The Emerging Republican Majority*,<sup>11</sup> Phillips analyzes socioeconomic data to conclude that the white working-class voters who produced 9,906,473 votes for George Wallace in the last election can be turned into permanent Republicans. This can be done, says Phillips, by taking over the Wallace message (which rejects peacenik and Black demands) and peddling it with enough sophistication to retain the present registered Republican clientele. Since the conservative, middle-class sun belt cities are growing at the expense of the Democratic cities in the East, this combination will give the Republicans a permanent majority.

The President has not, obviously, endorsed the book; but it fairly represents the strategy with which he fought the last election, and no repudiation of Phillips has been forthcoming: he assisted Attorney General Mitchell until February 1970. And it was to precisely this group, the Wallaceites, that the "vener of tough talk" was directed. Nixon's rhetorical strategy was thus influenced by a political strategy: placate the doves not at all, appeal to the patriotism of the silent majority, but above all, show the "lower-middle-class clerks in Queens, steelworkers in Youngstown, and retired police lieutenants in San Diego"<sup>12</sup> *that you are their champion*. This is the rhetoric of confrontation.

It is a rhetoric which the Nixon administration, up to now, has largely dele-

<sup>11</sup> (New Rochelle, 1969).

<sup>12</sup> The categories of Wallace supporters are those of Andrew Hacker in his sympathetic review of Phillips, "Is There a New Republican Majority?" *Commentary*, XLVIII (November 1969), 65-70.

gated to the Vice-President. Careful scrutiny of Nixon's text will provide support for the thesis that he sought confrontation. He made numerous references to humiliation, disaster, and defeat, all of which outcomes he projects on to his opponents; these are fighting words. They were incorporated in the speech against the better judgment of Henry Kissinger,<sup>13</sup> and, according to columnists Evans and Novak, against the advice of Republican leaders in Congress to "give the doves something": "Mr. Nixon rejected that advice because he consciously wanted to split off what he regards as a small minority of anti-war activists from his 'great silent majority' of Americans. He was striving for a polarization of opinion isolating the dissenters and thereby dooming the extremist-led Nov. 15 march on Washington."<sup>14</sup>

This divide-and-isolate strategy was not dictated by the circumstances. The substance of the President's plan could have been made palatable to many of his opponents. There were three crucial action programs: (1) avoid precipitate withdrawal; (2) keep the timetable secret; and (3) maintain a noncommunist government in Saigon. Given the division within the peace forces, who ranged from Friends to anarchists, he could easily have explained why the whole timetable could not be announced while announcing the next phase of withdrawal, which he did within six weeks anyway; he could have acknowledged the desirability of broadening the base of the Saigon government; and he could have put a higher priority on a cease fire. Had he done these things, he

could have substantially alleviated the fears of many doves.

He not only failed to make these gestures of conciliation, he went far to agitate his opponents. He need not have injected the abrasive discussion of how the war started and how we got involved. He need not have talked as if all his opponents favored precipitate withdrawal. He need not have paraded before us again the controversial domino theory. He need not have done these things, that is, unless he had already decided to write off the dissenters and to start building his "emerging Republican majority" with Wallaceite support. But the decision was his. Anthony Lewis, Pulitzer Prize Winner of *The New York Times*, put it this way: "The puzzle is why he chose to speak as he did. He could so easily have expounded the same policy in less doom-laden rhetoric."<sup>15</sup>

#### THE ARGUMENT

There were, according to the President, five questions on the minds of his listeners:

"How and why did America get involved in Vietnam in the first place?"

"How has this Administration changed the policy of the previous Administration?"

"What has really happened in the negotiations in Paris and the battlefield in Vietnam?"

"What choices do we have if we are to end the war?"

"What are the prospects for peace?"<sup>16</sup>

After a brief description of the "situation I found when I was inaugurated on Jan. 20th," he turns to what he claims is the "fundamental issue," why and how did we become involved in the first

<sup>13</sup> Robert B. Semple, Jr., "Nixon's November 3 Speech: Why He Took the Gamble Alone," *The New York Times*, January 19, 1970, p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> Rowland Evans and Robert Novak, "Nixon's Speech Wedded GOP Doves to Mass of Americans," *The Washington Post*, November 6, 1969, p. A23.

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Lewis, "The Test of American Greatness in Vietnam," *The New York Times*, November 8, 1969, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> All quotations from the speech are from *The New York Times* text, carried November 4, 1969, p. 16.

place. This is a surprising candidate for priority in any discussion today. One might have thought that the burning question was how to get out. The President's chief foreign policy advisors, his allies on Capitol Hill, and the memorandum he got from the Cabinet bureaucracy all urged him to skip discussions of the causes and manner of our involvement. Yet the history comes out with top billing. How and to what extent it is distorted is an interesting subject, but not our major concern here. This was a deliberative speech, and the President is arguing for a specific policy.

The substance of his policy argument, scattered throughout the speech, deals with four alternative plans for achieving disengagement. (The possibility of escalation is reserved as a club with which to scare the North Vietnamese into cooperating with Nixon's preferred plan for disengagement, but it is not offered as a full-fledged course of action in its own right.)

First, the President could "end the war at once by ordering the immediate withdrawal of all American forces. From a political standpoint, this would have been a popular and easy course to follow." But it is not Nixon's course; it is craven advice, and it draws his most concentrated fire.

It would, for one thing, constitute a defeat. Given Mr. Nixon's historic commitment to a noncommunist South Vietnam, and his visceral reaction to being bested by communists any time on any issue (as revealed in his autobiographical *Six Crises*)<sup>17</sup> it is not surprising that he makes much of this argument. Even though, as he claims, he could blame the defeat on his predecessor, this would not be an honorable course.

Whether acknowledging defeat in Vietnam would be a wise course is

another matter. Mr. Nixon's mentor, Eisenhower, recognized that, in the much more defensible war in Korea, we sustained a substantial defeat of MacArthur's objectives of rolling back the communists to the Yalu River. Most Americans seemed to approve a less-than-satisfactory settlement; avoidance of defeat did not then commend itself as the greatest good.

Similarly, in the abortive Bay of Pigs invasion, American-trained troops and American strategy suffered great humiliation. But, as Theodore Draper says of John F. Kennedy, "the President knew how to end the misery, without deception or whimpering, in a way that made him seem to grow in defeat."<sup>18</sup> The trauma of defeat varies with the character of the captain, as de Gaulle proved once again in Algeria. But then Nixon is no Kennedy or de Gaulle.

When one asks, "How can the anguish and terror of a loss in Vietnam be mitigated?" the answer has to be something other than the repeated stress on the necessity of avoiding defeat which we heard from President Nixon November 3. There is a case to be made for the honesty and therapeutic value of admitting that we were in over our heads, that we cannot police the whole world, that we really should not, as the military once told us, become involved in a ground war on the Asian continent.

Nixon does not reject immediate withdrawal solely on the basis of its intrinsic evil as a symbol of defeat. It would also lead to a train of undesirable consequences, all of which he ticks off as reasons for repudiating such a policy. It would damage the credibility of other American commitments; encourage communist aggressiveness everywhere; lead not only to the collapse of South Vietnam but all of Southeast Asia; result in

<sup>18</sup> *The Dominican Revolt* (New York, 1968), p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> (Garden City, N.Y., 1962).

horrendous massacres when the Viet Cong take over; and cause us to lose confidence in ourselves, with "inevitable remorse and divisive recrimination."

It might, indeed, do all of these things. These are consequences which need to be considered, *but they need to be considered only if immediate withdrawal is a serious alternative plan which the President needs to refute.* It is hard to see that it had such status. The sharpest challenge to his policy came from Senator Goodell and those who favored phased but definite withdrawal, with a specific deadline by which all American troops, or at least all combat troops, would be out. The call for immediate and total withdrawal came from a minority faction of the peace movement; and in rebutting it as if it were the most serious challenge to his preferred course, Nixon was drawing a red herring across the trail of his opponents, attacking a straw man whose demolition he could portray as destruction of the dissenters generally. This argumentative strategy seems to have succeeded with the silent majority; it festers and repels when one attends to his rhetoric carefully.

The second alternative plan for disengagement is negotiation. Mr. Nixon holds open some slight hope that this might still be the road out; but after a long and frustrating year of meeting with the enemy in Paris, he does not put much faith in it. In this he is undoubtedly correct. North Vietnam has not now, and is not likely to acquire, any faith in negotiated agreements. For those who can remove the distorting lenses of national self-righteousness, which of course always reveal the other party as culprit in scuttling international agreements, the evidence points overwhelmingly to a justification of Hanoi's attitude.<sup>19</sup> But

this need not concern us here. Aside from the debater's points Mr. Nixon makes by detailing the substance of U.S. negotiating proposals, and his claim that "Hanoi has refused even to discuss our proposals," this is a blind alley.

The third possible way to get out of Vietnam has the weightiest support behind it, both in the Senate and elsewhere; it is to withdraw steadily with a fixed terminal date. Here is the option upon which attention should have been focused. Here is the real challenge to presidential decision making. If the President were to reason with the most reasonable of his critics, he should have spent the bulk of his energies showing why this plan is disadvantageous compared to his; yet the emphasis it receives is minor.

The few swipes he takes at fixed-schedule withdrawal are instructive. "An announcement of a fixed timetable for our withdrawal would completely remove any incentive for the enemy to negotiate an agreement. They would simply wait until our forces had withdrawn and then move in." This attack is curious indeed. Have we not already written off the prospects for negotiation? Under what possible logic would the enemy be more likely to "wait until our forces had withdrawn and then move in" if they have a terminal point for that wait than if they do not? Is this not likely to happen whether the timetable is secret or public? Here is the core of the dispute between the President and his detractors, and he attends to it with a casual and obfuscating logic that defies belief.

The only other attack on the idea of a *terminus ad quem* for withdrawal is based on its alleged inflexibility; Mr. Nixon does not want to be "frozen in on a fixed timetable." One can accept that some flexibility in such an operation

<sup>19</sup> Probably the best source on American violations of the Geneva Agreement on Vietnam is George M. Kahin and John W. Lewis, *The*

*United States in Vietnam*, rev. ed. (New York, 1969).

might be in order. This seems not to have deterred our officials from setting up, if not a rigid schedule, at least a terminal date for the accomplishment of other objectives. One must strain one's imagination somewhat to conceive Mr. Nixon incapable of extending a deadline for withdrawal in the face of Vietcong attacks which he defined as serious.

Here is the sum total of the President's refutation of the most serious challenge his program faces. It is hardly worth the candle.

So, finally, we come to alternative number four, the plan adopted and defended by the President. This scenario was worked up by Herman Kahn of the Hudson Institute. The July, 1968 *Foreign Affairs* carried an article by Kahn setting forth his plan for deescalation: build up Arvin, withdraw most American combat units, leave behind a reservoir of between 200,000 and 300,000 men to "deter a resumption of major hostilities."<sup>20</sup> This is now Nixon's plan, with the additional proviso that no long-range schedule be announced.

One needs, at this stage, to view the plan as a whole, inspecting the justifications for it, the reasons for preferring it to alternatives, the rhetoric in which it is clothed. A number of salient points need close scrutiny. As with any policy proposal, the payoff stage is the prediction of future consequences: how will the plan work?

Specifically, one needs to know whether it is probable that (1) the Vietcong and Hanoi will tolerate the presence of 450,000, 400,000, or 350,000 foreign troops while the hated Thieu regime attempts to develop combat effectiveness; (2) the Vietcong and Hanoi will beyond that tolerate the indefinite presence in the country of 250,000 or more occupation troops; (3) the shaky

regime in Saigon will really develop political support and military muscle sufficient to keep the communists at bay; (4) the American public, including the great silent majority, the Emerging Republican Majority, and all the rest of us, will tolerate this kind of semi-permanent occupation even if combat casualties drop to zero; and (5) there will be less right-wing recrimination should this plan fail than if there is a fast, clean withdrawal.

The President's defense on all these points deserves the closest inspection. We need, in a situation where Mr. Nixon admits "that many Americans have lost confidence in what their Government has told them about our policy," some indication of the evidence on which these assumed consequences are based, whether it be from the CIA, the military, the State Department, Sir Robert Thompson, or wherever. We need some assurance that the President is capable of what social psychologists call "tough-minded empathy," or the ability to see this plan as Hanoi sees it, and not just from the compulsively optimistic viewpoint of the Department of Defense.

There is nothing. The plan is there, take it or leave it. There is a warning to Hanoi to go along or else. There is a recognition that "some of my fellow citizens disagree" with the plan he has chosen. There is a rejection of demonstrations in the street, an appeal to the young people of the nation to turn their energies to constructive ends, a call for patriotism, a reference to Woodrow Wilson (at whose desk he spoke). In defense of his plan, there is only a contemptible rhetorical device, "My fellow Americans, I am sure you can recognize from what I have said that we really have only two choices open to us if we want to end this war. I can order an immediate precipitate withdrawal of all Americans from Vietnam without regard to the

<sup>20</sup> "If Negotiations Fail," XLVI, 627-641.



effects of that action. Or we can persist in our search for a just peace through . . . our plan for Vietnamization." Here it is, all over again, the false dilemma, the black or white position, the collapse of all alternative strategies into the one most offensive and easiest to ridicule. Only two choices: my plan, or the cut-and-run cowardice of the rioters in the streets.

It is, perhaps, a consummation to be expected of the politician who perfected the technique of "The Illusion of Proof."<sup>21</sup>

For the attentive public to accept the Nixon program of open-ended, no-deadline withdrawal, we have got to have answers which he does not provide. Literally dozens of his opponents have protested that he is giving Saigon the best excuse in the world for not broadening its base, for not coming to terms with the Buddhists and General Khanh, for not cracking down on corruption, for not accommodating to the demands of the peasants in the countryside. As Reston put it, "For if his policy is to stick with the South Vietnamese until they demonstrate that they are secure, all they have to do is prolong their inefficiency in order to guarantee that we will stay in the battle indefinitely."<sup>22</sup> No defense of the President's plan could ignore the logic of this argument; yet ignore it is precisely what Mr. Nixon did.

#### CONSEQUENCES

The announcement that the President would speak about the war on November 3 had consequences in itself. The October Moratorium was weakened; an attitude of "let's wait and see" may have deterred many would-be doves from

participating. But the significant consequences were of course after the speech.

The stock market, that sensitive barometer of America's morale and business health, dropped. At 10:30 on the morning of the 4th, prices were down 7.72 on the Dow-Jones industrial average. Stocks largely recovered later in the day, and closed mixed; but the people who handle the money clearly didn't think the President had pulled a coup.

One consequence of the speech, given Nixon's past debilitating relationship with the journalistic fraternity, was a serious lowering of his credibility. Reston put it this way: "The result is that the really important men reporting on the Presidency—not the columnists but the reporters and White House correspondents—are now wondering about the President after his Vietnam speech and his partisan reaction to the elections. He invited them to believe that he would not be like President Johnson, that he would be open and candid. But his approach and reaction to the elections have not been open and candid but personal and partisan. Like Johnson he has dealt with the politics of his problem but not with the problem of Vietnam."<sup>23</sup>

The effects in Saigon were electric. As the *Times* headline read on November 10, "Nixon's Impact: Thieu is Helped Through a Tight Spot."<sup>24</sup> The National Assembly had been raising hell, a motion of no confidence was being discussed in the lower house, and a petition calling for a nationwide referendum was being circulated. Nixon stopped all this. His reaffirmed commitment to stay until there was no more challenge to "freedom" strengthened Thieu's hand immeasurably. Not being one to bite the

<sup>21</sup> See Barnet Baskerville, "The Illusion of Proof," *Western Speech*, XXV (Fall 1961), 236-242.

<sup>22</sup> James Reston, "Washington: The Unanswered Vietnam Questions," *The New York Times*, December 10, 1969, p. 54.

<sup>23</sup> James Reston, "Washington: The Elections and the War," *The New York Times*, November 7, 1969, p. 46.

<sup>24</sup> Terence Smith, *The New York Times*, November 10, 1969, p. 2.

hand that upholds him, Thieu recorded his gratitude for the press: this was "one of the most important and greatest" speeches made by an American President.<sup>25</sup>

The three domestic audiences identified at the beginning of this essay reacted predictably. Nixon's supporters, the hawks and the Emerging Republican Majority, were delighted. Columnist Joseph Alsop rejoiced hugely: "Whether you agree or disagree with its content, this remarkable speech was one of the most successful technical feats of political leadership in many, many years."<sup>26</sup>

The silent majority was impressed. Gallup, who clocked them in by telephone immediately after the speech, found 77% approving. And in his regular survey of presidential performance, taken November 14-16, approval of the President generally rose 12% over the previous month, to a high of 68%.<sup>27</sup> Although as Gallup noted, there was some question as to the durability of this result, the speech did sell; the "terrifying sincerity" was just what the public wanted to see. But the long pull is yet ahead.

The doves were horror-struck. There had been much reason to believe that the speech would be conciliatory, that the rhetoric would be encouraging. One consequence of the toughness of the speech was that registrations for buses to Washington for the November 13-15 events flooded in;<sup>28</sup> and the ultimate crowd in Washington could be said to be a direct result of Nixon's challenge to

the dissidents. The effete ones were not going to take it lying down.

The candid conclusion must be that the President cheered his friends and disheartened his enemies. The peace movement is in disarray, planning no more massive marches, resigned to campus and campaign activities—until the President slips, or Hanoi trips him. As of the end of December, Richard Starnes of Scripps-Howard put it succinctly: "Peace Marchers Give Round to Nixon."<sup>29</sup>

#### EPILOGUE

The Nixon style in this speech has been characterized as "tough talk." But this is not the same as saying it was rough; Nixon did preserve the amenities. As Reston put it, "He put Spiro Agnew's confrontation language into the binding of a hymn book."<sup>30</sup> But hymn books are not the only score from which the Administration sings. The cruder, more abrasive tunes are coming steadily from the Vice-President; and it is worth inquiring as to whether the Nixon tune must be heard against the accompaniment of his second in command.

The arguments that have raged in Washington as to whether the Vice-President plays the role of hatchet man to Nixon's above-the-battle dignity just as Nixon was once the hatchet man for Eisenhower, has now largely been resolved. Agnew comes up with his own script. His purple-passioned prose is indigenous, and with the exception of his November 13 blast against the television networks, which according to Clark Mollenhoff "was developed in the White House,"<sup>31</sup> the ideas as well as the language are his.

<sup>25</sup> Terence Smith, "Thieu Hails the Speech: 'One of Most Important,'" *The New York Times*, November 5, 1969, p. 10.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Alsop, "Nixon Leadership is Underestimated," *The Washington Post*, December 29, 1969, p. A13.

<sup>27</sup> George Gallup, "Nixon Support Soars to 68%," *The Washington Post*, November 24, 1969, p. A1.

<sup>28</sup> David E. Rosenbaum, "Thousands Due in Capital In War Protest This Week," *The New York Times*, November 9, 1969, pp. 1, 56.

<sup>29</sup> *The Pittsburgh Press*, December 26, 1969, p. 15.

<sup>30</sup> James Reston, November 5, 1969.

<sup>31</sup> E. W. Kenworthy, "Nixon Aide Says Agnew Stand Reflects White House TV View," *The New York Times*, November 16, 1969, p. 78.

But even when he is doing his own thing, Mr. Agnew represents the President's true gut feelings.<sup>32</sup> The relationship is one of willing supporter, not ventriloquist's dummy. If Agnew were not around to ventilate the President's pique, someone else would have to be commandeered to put out the purple-passioned prose. The President himself, of course, could do it very well; the summer of 1969 he reverted to a former style with his colorful speeches at General Beadle State College and the Air Force Academy; but the reaction to these by the President's staff was less than enthusiastic, and he has since then turned over the rough talk to the Vice-President.

What we have, then, in the President's speech, is the substance of toughness without the rough style. And the President's text is indeed sanitized. What he might have said, what his style would have been were he not consciously trying to retain the old Republican genteel clientele, one can discover by reading Agnew. The visceral language, the blunt insults, the uncompromising hostilities are missing.<sup>33</sup>

But a presidential address must meet higher standards than campaign oratory or the speeches of lesser figures. Nixon's speech did not meet them. Neither his rhetorical strategies nor his substantive argument were sound. Yet the most likely time for healing and realistic rhetoric has passed. The President's personal involvement in Government decisions will grow, his commitment to what we are doing now will increase, his access to noncongruent intelligence

will decrease, the youth will become more alienated. Nixon is not LBJ, and the total closing of filters that occurred in the last days of the Johnson Administration probably will not happen again; but the prospect for improvement is slight. One can always hope that another Clark Clifford is waiting in the wings to restore sanity, or another Eugene McCarthy will appear in the hustings to startle a self-deluded establishment.

A fitting summary of the whole business is provided by Anthony Lewis:

The preeminent task of Richard Nixon's Presidency is to heal a nation torn apart by Vietnam. The President knew that when he took the oath of office, and it is no less urgently true today. Part of the process must be to help the American people know, and accept, the unpleasant truths about the war: that we got into it by stealth and for reasons at best uncertain; that the Government we defend in South Vietnam is corrupt and unrepresentative; that in the course of fighting we have killed people and ravaged a country to an extent utterly out of proportion to our cause, and that, in the old sense of dictating to the enemy, we cannot "win." In those terms, Mr. Nixon's speech to the nation last Monday evening was a political tragedy.<sup>34</sup>

It was not just the speech that was a political tragedy; the speech merely made visible tragic policy decisions—to maintain the goals and propaganda of the cold war, to seek confrontation with those who want change, to go with a power base confined to white, nonurban, uptight voters. Given such decisions, the shoddy rhetoric, the tough talk, the false dilemmas are inevitable. Instant criticism, via the networks, while desirable, cannot begin to do justice to such policies and such rhetoric. They require more searching exploration. As the saying goes, presidential rhetoric is much too important to be left to presidents.

<sup>32</sup> Robert B. Semple, Jr., "Agnew: The Evidence is That He's Speaking for Nixon," *The New York Times*, November 2, 1969, Sec. 4, p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> But the old debater's syndrome is very much present. A good capsule description of what this means is in Earl Mazo and Stephen Hess, *Nixon: A Political Portrait* (New York, 1968), p. 7.

<sup>34</sup> *The New York Times*, November 8, 1969, p. 32.

Copyright of Quarterly Journal of Speech is the property of National Communication Association and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.