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Life's Many Sides

The alternatives proposed by Gen. Gavin

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NEWSWEEK Magazine, in its latest issue, reported that General Gavin had proposed two alternatives on Vietnam: 1) deploy troops on the 17th parallel and along the Cambodian border, 2) maintain enclaves on the coast, desist in bombing attacks on North Vietnam, and seek to find a solution through the United Nations or a Geneva conference.

NEWSWEEK described General Gavin as a brilliant combat commander in World War II and, as Chief of Plans and Operations, largely responsible for the US decisions not to enter the Indochina war at France's side. On the other hand, in a book published several years ago, General Gavin gave special attention to the problem of 'limited warfare'. And put forward many valuable suggestions.

To our knowledge, General Gavin has not visited Viet Nam and studied the Vietnamese problem on the spot. Hence his odd proposals.

Now, to suggest that the US should deploy troops on the 17th parallel and along the Cambodian border as a strategy to win the war in South Vietnam would make every GI who has fought the Vietcong at Chu Lai, Ia-Drang, Plei Me and Cau Prong laugh his head off. I do not know whether General Gavin has carefully read Mao-Tse-Tung, Vo Nguyen-Giap or others on guerilla war, and on war in Vietnam in particular. The Vietnam war is a revolutionary and protracted guerilla war. This has been recognised by everyone. In such a war, we are told repeatedly, there is no front. The enemy is everywhere. To put American soldiers on the 17th parallel and along the Cambodian border, looking, we presume, towards the North and the West, would mean that 1) a lot of US troops will be needed (how many per 100 meters along the 2000 kilometre-long Vietnamese-Laotian and Cambodian borders?), 2) the GIs will be standing isolated along the border and can be stabbed in the back or picked up one by one, or by groups of ten, or a hundred, by the VC moving in from behind.

We have not even examined the problem of how to get the GIs, or groups of GIs, from the coast to the borders, through territory which would have been let to the absolute control of the Vietcong... Neither have we examined the problem of where to find enough men to maintain the strength of the ARVN in a country whose population is left to the absolute control of the enemy. Nor have we examined the problem of how to prevent the Vietcong from getting the rice, the rubber, and numerous of other things which can be collected leisurely for export and purchase arms and ammunitions to carry on the war indefinitely and with many advantages on their side.

It would not be a bad idea for Mr. McNamara to suggest to General Gavin to come to Vietnam and stand guard for half an hour on the 17th parallel or along the Lao and Cambodian borders, to see reality for himself instead of talking about strategy in the comfortable armchairs of the battles of Chu-Lai, Cau-Prong, Ia-Drang and hear what they have to say about being shot from behind by men who popped up from nowhere!

With regard to the enclave theory, I have discussed them in connection with Mr. Ruston's ideas, and there is no need to repeat them here. Concerning the search of a solution through the

United Nations or Geneva Conference, the news of the last few days provide a cold answer to the general's proposal: the other side won't have it. If they have talked about peace, it is peace on their own conditions, because they believe they are going to win. There can be no peace until AND UNLESS the other side is convinced that it cannot win now, in ten years, in fifty years, or in a hundred years. Then, they will have to explain to their people, as well as to the people of the South, and perhaps to the communist in other countries, too, what they sacrifice in men, money, resources, and the prestige of the communist camp for. Perhaps Jaspao can do some thinking along these lines and put something of it in their 140 million leaflets.

We are told that those who spoke against US intervention in 1954, in particular General Gavin and General Ridgway have saved a lot of American lives. I do not agree with that view. If the United States had intervened then, a lot of lives would have been saved in the last twelve years (Vietnamese, Viet Minh, Viet Cong), and a lot of American lives and money would have been saved in the past two years, because we would have had a much better peace at Geneva in 1954.

On one thing I entirely agree with General Gavin: we should not be reluctant to express opinions, and our government should encourage us to express our opinions, even when we strongly disagree with the official point of view. What matters is not so much our views as the reasoning that supports those views, and the governments can derive tremendous benefits from looking closely at the reasons given, in order to think afresh about the problems on hand.