



William F. Buckley, Jr.

Nixon at bat

I approached Mr. Nixon's speech last week with high expectations, and as the saying goes, I was half satisfied. I will settle for that.

I had hoped that, finally, the President would declare that henceforward no American conscript would be sent to combat duty in Vietnam, except as a volunteer. Shortly after the speech I inquired why the President had not made such a declaration, and was advised by a Pentagon official that "the arithmetic doesn't check out."

I DID NOT press him, but I nevertheless find it inexplicable that with a regular armed force in excess of two million men, to which we might add those conscripts who believe in the Vietnam War, we cannot come up with the 150,000 men nowadays exposed to combat duty in Vietnam. We have less than 300,000 men there, and the rough estimate is that sixty per cent of them are exposed to combat.

Why do we need a national draft, in a country of two hundred million people, in order to come up with 150,000 combatants, who in any case will be reduced by approximately five per cent per month during the next period? The temper of the country has recently turned against the Vietnam war.

But there are still those who profoundly believe in the American mission there. Surely, from the loins of these, the few thousand volunteers would issue, as necessary (if at all), to supplement the regular armed force whose job it is to engage in routine military enterprises as prescribed by the commander-in-chief in pursuit of American security?

SURELY SOMEBODY in the Executive apparatus ought to explain why "the arithmetic doesn't check out." Why is the explanation so abstruse? The effort is surely worth making, because the presumption in America is that non-volunteers ought not to be used except in cases of a national emergency. Why is it a national emergency to keep 150,000 men in

combat-ready situations in South Vietnam, with the casualty rate reduced to one-fifth of what it was when Mr. Nixon took office?

It surpasses the understanding why the President doesn't consider the subject worth explaining, and one wonders whether he is insufficiently aware of the meaning it would have to the morale of the country if he were to declare that henceforward no American would risk injury in Vietnam who did not go there voluntarily, or professionally.

But then, the disappointment apart, the balance of the speech was profoundly satisfying. It is most often said about Mr. Nixon that he is a political opportunist. When Lyndon Johnson affirmed and reaffirmed the necessity of following through with our commitments in Vietnam he had the satisfaction of knowing that the overwhelming majority of the American people agreed with him, even if, toward the end, the Democratic vote was almost evenly divided.

MR. NIXON, when he spoke last week, has seen polls that suggest that two-thirds of the American people desire ardently a date, preferably before the end of this calendar year, when we will be out of Vietnam altogether. It is in the teeth of this popular current that the President spoke, simply, firmly, declining to bend under the pressure.

If Mr. Nixon were the opportunist he is accused of being, how easy it would have been to announce the end of the American presence in Vietnam, not later than, say, next Christmas. Oh, how very many volunteers he'd have found among his associates who'd have composed him a speech logically and morally irresistible, except perhaps to those who reason grimly forward to the strategic consequences of an unthinking withdrawal.

Instead, Mr. Nixon simply

said: we were right to begin with, we are right now not to panic, it would be a mistake to hand over to the enemy a unilateral commitment which could only have the effect of strengthening their resolution. It is not necessary to parade yet again the reasons why it was strategically correct to help the Vietnamese, in order to isolate the deed of Richard Nixon.

THE MINORITY are very few who would have turred against him if he had said: Vietnamization is complete, and now we are withdrawing. He'd have pleased the huge majority, hugely, and he is cunning enough to devise sufficient explanations in the event that the situation in Vietnam turned sour. One wonders whether some of Mr. Nixon's most persistent critics, whatever they may think about his decision, will admit, however grudgingly, to his having acted bravely, conscientiously; admirably.

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