

NOTES ON VIETNAM POLICY: A STRATEGY FOR DISSENT

21 January 1970

Nixon's plan seems now clear; including the motives for its public vagueness. What its consequences may be, is uncertain; what it is intended to produce -- what is expected, hoped for, planned -- is much less so.

Two of its features, I believe, account for its secrecy from detailed public inspection. First, it does not call for drawing the level of U.S. troops in Vietnam down to zero, or close to it, at any time in the future (except in case of total failure, or of success beyond what the Administration, and especially the military, regard as realistically possible). It proposes an indefinite floor to the American presence -- including military personnel involved in air support, logistics, helicopter/truck/artillery maintenance, communications, intelligence, and advisors, plus some combat troops -- which may range from 30,000-50,000 (an improbable, optimistically low figure perhaps favored by Laird, and leaked to select members of Congress) up to 200,000 (favored by the JCS and MACV), with Nixon probably hoping for and expecting something in the middle of that range. Even the lowest of these figures represents a troop commitment -- to be maintained indefinitely in support of ongoing combat (in contrast to Korea and Germany) -- larger than the level of U.S. troops in Vietnam at the onset of the bombing campaign in 1965. Thus, even at its most optimistic, it is not a plan of withdrawal but of reduction; even as intended, it is not a plan for getting out, but for staying in indefinitely.

Second, I believe that it is not a plan for straight-line or accelerated reduction of U.S. forces down to the proposed floor, but rather for a slow, delayed rate of reduction in the early phases, accelerating (if the decision is made to head for a floor as low as 30,000-75,000, otherwise not necessarily) from late 1971, to early 1973. In other words, the plan proposes to hold a very large number of American troops -- as many as is politically feasible -- in South Vietnam as long as possible: i.e., to have something close to 300,000 U.S. troops still in Vietnam at least through this year and preferably till the end of 1971, three years into the Nixon Administration. The hope is to buy public acceptance of at least another year and perhaps two full years of large-scale U.S. troop involvement: in order to "continue grinding down the infrastructure," hold North Vietnamese forces at bay, allow the GVN to consolidate its extended control in the countryside, postpone the psychological effects on the GVN of a rapid withdrawal of U.S. forces, improve ARVN technical, command and materiel inadequacies, continue the pressure in NVA/VC activities and perhaps, discourage the Hanoi leadership and cause withdrawals of NVA forces or concession in Paris.

This supposes, then, two more years of large scale of U.S. combat involvement in Vietnam (hopefully, with sharply decreasing U.S. casualties, though this depends upon Hanoi reaction), in hopes of significantly improving the GVN's position within South Vietnam and our bargaining position in Paris. Nixon probably puts little faith in the latter; the main aim of this strategy would be to improve the situation on the ground in the next year or two to



such an extent that an indefinite commitment thereafter of some 30,000-200,000 men would not only preserve an anti-communist Government in Saigon but would suffer a low enough rate in U.S. casualties and other costs to be acceptable by the U.S. public.

The public declaratory aspects of this policy have been shrewdly designed to win majority acceptance of it at the outset. Nixon gambled (so far, correctly) that by focusing the public's attention on the end result of reduction -- holding out the possibility of total withdrawal, but leaving the floor vague between zero and something under a hundred thousand -- and emphasizing that the movement of troop levels would be consistently downward, never up, he would gain the support of a majority, who would not be inclined to press as to the exact rate of withdrawals or even as to the exact final floor to be reached in the future (so long as it was strikingly different from 500,000). In other words, the majority of the public would tolerate vagueness about these aspects, and he would benefit from the wishful belief by many that he was getting out faster and further than he actually planned. Probably a significant part of his current support is from people who believe that he will be reducing forces in the next two years "as fast as logistically practicable" (despite contrary indications in Administration statements) and still more believe, vaguely, that his interest is to have all U.S. forces out of Vietnam. Yet I suspect that he could still gain majority support of Americans for the plan I have described, even if he made it fully explicit. This explicitness, however, would disappoint and cause strong dissent in a sizeable number of Americans (though probably a minority), this constituting both an unnecessary political cost and an "encouragement to Hanoi." Hence, a misleading vagueness.

Nixon's policy is not, of course, defined by his force reduction plan and his expression of it to the public; these are parts of a whole which include relations with the Saigon government, relations with the Hanoi government, and public and private statements of U.S. aims and interests. The latter includes the indefinite maintenance of an anti-communist government in Saigon. Statements that the administration would regard a "freely chosen government" as acceptable even if it were communist-dominated are untrue, now as usually in the past (communist domination would probably be taken by the administration as proof that the government had not been "freely chosen"; in any case, such a result would be regarded as disastrous to U.S. interests in the area and a humiliating failure). And the only "non-communist" government that the Administration would regard as likely reliably to remain so would be one that was unequivocally "anti-communist." This being so, the policy does not include any pressure or even real encouragement to the Thieu government to broaden itself in any significant way to include elements whose desire for peace is more urgent, or who are willing to compromise with communist participation in the government. On the contrary, any "spontaneous" movement in this direction by the Vietnamese in or outside the present Saigon government would probably be discouraged or blocked by us, in part because it would interfere with the image of stability of the present government, but more because it would be against what the administration sees as our interests, which are best protected by the present Saigon regime. As for negotiations with the Hanoi regime or the NLF, far from being willing to conceive or explore proposals for cease-fire or compromise settlement, the administration fears possible initiatives from the other side,



at least until after an intense effort to continue "strengthening our bargaining position" over the next two years. A cease-fire, even a partial one, would abort this effort and is to be avoided. (Genuine mutual withdrawal might be acceptable, but this is extremely unlikely in the absence of political settlement, and regarded by the Administration as unlikely to be carried out satisfactorily by the other side and, in any case, less satisfactory than carrying on as is for the next two years).

The war is politically stalemated. The leadership in Hanoi, Saigon, and Washington each prefers to continue the war at the present (or, periodically, a greater) level of combat than to make the concessions that might be adequate to end it; each set of leaders may even feel that it would be ultimately deposed if it followed a different policy. The mass of the American public seems satisfied with the situation, on the expectation that the burden of casualties and costs will be sharply declining for them, which may be true. The only people who are almost surely not satisfied with this situation are those on whom burdens of the war, and our continued combat involvement in it, bear most heavily: the mass of the South Vietnamese, and probably (to a lesser extent) the mass of the North Vietnamese. But these interests are not politically represented: neither in the two opposing capitals of the divided country, nor in Paris, nor in Washington.

In America, the potential for majority support for Nixon's policy raises two questions: a) What is wrong with the policy? and b) what is to be gained politically by saying publicly what is wrong with it? On the latter point, why buck public acceptance now, on the basis of speculation about the future; why not just let events take their course? If the policy is wrong, NVA/VC combat pressure and American public disillusionment will destroy it eventually. On the other hand, if the feasibility assumptions underlying it are realistic, after all, then why protest strongly if the policy does leave us with a troop presence in Vietnam but with a low level of U.S. casualties, accepted by the bulk of the public? So some argue, advising against a "high profile" of public dissent at this time. From this point of view, two political tests of the Nixon policy lie ahead.

The first will come when the NVA/VC put strong combat pressure on the RVNAF and the remaining U.S. forces, raising U.S. casualties significantly (though perhaps at great cost to the opponents). If the first test does not arrive or is passed successfully, a hurdle for the Administration policy will loom when the proposed force reduction is completed and the public realizes that the Administration does not propose to go down below, say 200,000, or 50,000 (in either case, presumably, with a reasonable prospect of low U.S. combat casualties; otherwise this would not be a relevant political issue).

Some who advise against waging a strong campaign against the President's policy now believe that on the occasion of major VC pressure, the Administration will almost surely be forced by the U.S. public to change its program to one of quick withdrawal, "pulling the rug out" from under the GVN, despite earlier rhetoric, and hastening total extrication. Even if the VC pressure is not dramatic over the next two years, they believe that the U.S. public will not, in the end, accept a floor on the U.S. presence in Vietnam higher than zero, but would insist on proceeding to total withdrawal: unless U.S.



costs and casualties were very low indeed and likely to remain so, in which case, these critics believe, protest might be unjustified and in any case would almost surely be futile. Those who hold these views believe that protest would have no effect in the short run (prior to VC pressure) on either the President or the public, and would add nothing to the pressure of events in the longer run.

The above view probably is right about the short run: nothing that critics can say will have any significant effect on the actual rate of withdrawals, the President's policy or even the public attitudes toward it in the short run, i.e., before the Viet Cong again dramatize the rate of U.S. casualties or the shortcomings and inadequacy of RVNAF. In fact, a large part of the public would probably even be irritated if a critic forced the subject on their attention at this time. Is criticism, then, worthwhile now, and if so what should be its aims?

I think that strong dissent is important now, primarily because I am not confident that the President would be forced quickly to extricate under public pressure at either of the two decision points described above. (I also believe that Nixon's policy, probably correctly understood by Hanoi, gives the Hanoi leadership strong incentive to press a strong attack in Vietnam when they are ready, causing great loss of life on both sides; both the lives lost in this offensive and the lives to be lost on both sides before this occurs are deplorable in the highest degree. These would provide the strongest reasons for pressing dissent now in order to avert these losses, if one believed that such dissent had any chance of affecting policy soon, or before a combat test. But since this seems very unlikely, these take second place as tactical objectives of dissent to the one mentioned, the contingent effects on policy of future failures and losses in Vietnam). I am not sure that the public -- which is clearly against escalation or continuation of former levels of troops and combat -- is sufficiently alert to and convinced by the arguments for total extrication or against continued intervention. Nor am I sure that the President is so sensitive to electoral pressure as the argument above assumes, or will still be after another year or two pursuing the present course.

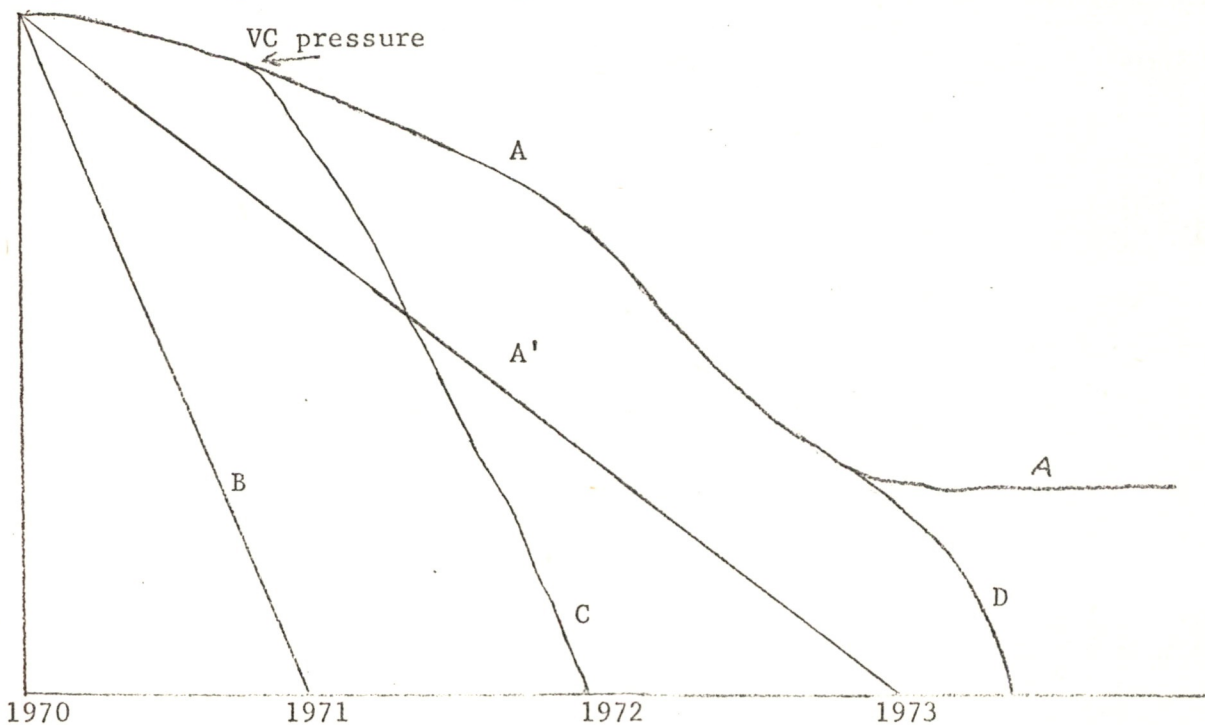
The President is already significantly committed to this present policy, but he could become much more so. Indeed, he would almost surely become more committed the longer the policy is pursued, both because of the personal investment of prestige involved in maintaining large U.S. forces exposed to risk in Vietnam, and also because, in the presence of even minority dissent, he will be led to spend the intervening time explaining to the public why it is that U.S. honor and interests "demand" that these forces be maintained there, words that will combine with his personal involvement to make it increasingly difficult for him to withdraw from the policy under combat pressure from the communists, even in the face of increasing or majority public demands to do so. Likewise, both these factors would combine to reinforce his present disposition to preserve a critical U.S. force element of 30,000-100,000 in Vietnam (if lack of dramatic VC offensives permit U.S. forces to be reduced to this level "peaceably"), even should there be strong public sentiment later for such forces to be withdrawn entirely. Public dissent now, therefore, should aim at insuring that public pressure for a total withdrawal will be large and effective in either of these two cases, and meanwhile should aim to dissuade the President



from committing himself more explicitly than necessary to resisting such pressure when the time comes. If the underlying premises of the President's policy are not now forcefully and persuasively criticized, there is a good possibility that majority dissent from the policy, even should it arise as a result of Viet Cong blows, would not be of such a focussed character as to deter the increasingly-committed Administration from persisting (or even from the escalation threatened by Nixon in his November speech). Meanwhile the Administration would be lashing out at this very dissent, so that while still more lives were being lost, the nation would also suffer the most ominous conflict between repressive and rebellious forces.

These tactical aims are more limited than what seemed reasonable six months ago. In September, there seemed cause to hope that the new President could yet be dissuaded from committing his own prestige to the mistakes of his Democratic predecessors, and could perhaps even be led to adopt a policy of prompt extrication. Instead, on November 3rd, the President proclaimed "Nixon's war" and it has since become increasingly clear that he has no intention of disowning his own earlier endorsement of the initial aims of the involvement. If the tactics of dissent in October and November were intended in part to "save Nixon from himself" (as I thought they just might do) they must be regarded as having failed. Given the current degree of public endorsement of the President's deliberate commitment, new tactics cannot realistically aim at the immediate abandonment of that program, but at ultimately shortening it and limiting its consequences.

The logic of the argument so far can be illustrated by the following diagram showing alternative rough schedules of force withdrawal from Vietnam.





The path marked A shows in rough terms what I take to be the President's private plan; though vagueness in its public expression allows many of his supporters to believe that the actual withdrawal schedule is something like A'. The path C marks a course of rapid extrication following events that bring about public disillusionment with the President's policy, probably a costly (not necessarily "successful") NVA/VC offensive. Course D carries the Administration program of force reduction past its proposed floor, down to zero. Policy B (like Senator Gooddell's plan) would lead to total extrication within twelve months from now. At this point, such a proposal probably has little chance of winning much support even from the U.S. public or Congress, let alone the Administration. The reason for spelling out justification and logic for such a course as B, and endorsing it -- along with endorsing real U.S. initiatives toward a cease-fire, toward a provisional peace government in Saigon and toward negotiated and other provisions for sanctuary -- is primarily to increase the probability that courses C or D will actually be followed, the sooner the better, rather than prolonged, tragic pursuit of course A.

What should be the content of such dissent? What is wrong with the Administration's program? Much of what has been said above seems worth expressing to the public, to clarify the true nature of the program; this would probably not eliminate the President's majority support, but it would narrow it, and would encourage a more critical and attentive attitude among the rest. Beyond this, following are some themes that seem to me to deserve emphasis:

1. This policy proposes, almost guarantees, a great many more American deaths, and a great deal of killing of Vietnamese, military and civilians, by American combat units. This is especially so, if the policy goads the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong into costly offensives against U.S. and GVN forces, as it is likely to do (more likely than are alternative policies which would commit us publicly to total and reasonably prompt withdrawal). But even without dramatic offensives, total U.S. deaths over the next two years are almost sure to be large and Vietnamese deaths much larger still. And even if U.S. combat deaths should be low after that, Vietnamese deaths in combat prolonged by our support -- and caused, on the other side, largely by our continued bombing -- would not be.
2. No adequate purpose is served by these additional deaths. The most likely outcome, increasingly so as the war goes on, is that these additional deaths will have served no purpose whatever, in that they will merely have postponed an ultimate outcome described simply: the Americans leave, the communists dominate South Vietnam. But suppose that the best outcome envisioned by the plan comes about, so that with the continued presence of 30,000 U.S. troops and air support, and indefinitely prolonged bombing, a narrow-based, self-serving military dictatorship with or without a carefully-screened and impotent parliamentary facade, persists in extending police "controls" over a majority of the citizens of South Vietnam. Neither would this result come anywhere near justifying the deaths suffered or inflicted by U.S. combat participation in this war for two more years, or one more year. (After all, if they disagreed, how many lives -- American and Vietnamese -- does the Administration think would be justifiably expended to achieve this result? How many do they believe would die,



under this policy; would it clearly be less? How sure are they of this last estimate; how sure it would not be twice as much, or more? How many lives are they prepared to gamble on these estimates? And how many more Têt "victories," how many Song Mys would it be acceptable to experience?) Still less would its attainment justify indefinitely prolonged killing by Americans after two years, either directly by bombs or indirectly by combat support. Indeed, it is simply an unjustifiable abuse of the Vietnamese people to cooperate in imposing such a regime upon them (even without a war); and it is an abuse of ourselves, of our sense of values and purpose, of the ideals and the sacrificed lives of our youth, to pretend otherwise, to deceive ourselves further.

3. Those who believe that Nixon is leading us out of Vietnam, either rapidly or altogether, are deceived. Those who knowingly accept his leadership toward a continued combat presence and involvement are being led in a wrong direction; and the longer the President is allowed to set this course without protest, the harder it will be for him, or anyone, to change it later.

If the policy succeeds to the limit of its reasonable hopes, it means that we stay in Vietnam "forever," supporting an ongoing war. It means we would have reversed the policy errors of 1965 onwards (bombing the North, open-ended commitment of U.S. ground troops) only to return to the policy errors of 1961-64, more efficiently carried out. Continued involvement would still carry the seeds of future reescalation, with the commitment of personal, party and national prestige, declaration of vital interest, bureaucratic incentives to give over-optimistic estimates of the prospects of "victory," and pressures on the other side to raise the bid. But even if the level of U.S. casualties remained low -- indeed, even if Vietnamese casualties finally became low, as violence subsided -- the results achieved would not justify even the subsequent, ongoing costs, in moral and psychological terms as well as material and human, of a prolonged occupation of South Vietnam by U.S. support troops, U.S.-paid mercenaries, and a U.S.-financed, dictatorial regime.

4. It is simply untrue, now as in the past -- a conscious deceit -- that it has been the goal of our government to promote "free choice, self-determination" by the people of Vietnam, North or South. Since at least 1949 (the fall of China) successive American administrations have seen it as strongly contrary to our interests that a Vietnamese government (after 1954, a South Vietnamese Government) should contain any communists in significant roles, believing that, as in post-war Czechoslovakia, this would be bound to lead to communist take-over, an outcome unacceptable to us.

The real issue is not whether a large majority of the South Vietnamese would have voted for Ho Chi Minh in a free election in 1954, as President Eisenhower believed, nor even whether they would currently win the high proportion of Assembly seats that the well-organized Catholics have achieved with less than 10% of the population. What is clear is that each government we have backed in South Vietnam has lacked by our own estimates the



support of a majority of the people of a country, and has indeed enjoyed the willing support of factions no larger altogether than the communist-led minority which was being excluded totally from open political participation. Each of these governments has been totally dependent upon foreign aid, in part because we made it so freely available, but primarily because it has lacked the political support and the self-assurance to tax its own people sufficiently to meet its internal needs; indeed, such urban support as they have enjoyed has to a large extent been bought by our willingness to maintain an artificially high standard of living through commodity imports. Likewise, the most important internal pillar of these governments, the army, has been bought for it by almost total U.S. underwriting of the military budget.

The current result is a basically military regime whose rationale for leadership, and whose income (mainly corrupt) derive mainly from the war and would almost surely be ended, with the ending of the war and of American support. This loss of income and status for the military leadership would result not only if the war ended with a communist victory but if it ended with a total defeat of the communists, if that should end the urgency of American pressures and support for a strictly anti-communist regime. Thus, the interests of the Thieu/Ky Government are served only by a continuation of a war with American support. If support of such a government serves any American interests, there are three, at least, that it cannot serve at all: the need to justify our presence and intervention in Vietnam; our desire to believe that our efforts support the interests and desires of the Vietnamese people; the need to see the war ended. To say that the terms of our departure are dependent upon the will of this government is to say no more than that we have chosen to stay forever. To take the will of this government as evidence and expression of the will of the mass of the Vietnamese people that the war and our combat participation in it should continue, is to deceive the American public.

It is, indeed, not for us to choose the form of government for the Vietnamese people. But it is time to end the deception that we have not made that choice for them, when we support with our armed presence and vast material aid a government that is, on the one hand, totally dependent on that support, and on the other hand, which suppresses all opposition and freedom of expression on dictatorial lines. The members of a regime that forbids freedom of speech, press, and political representation bearing upon the most vital question of society, war or peace, may find their own reasons for doing so, but we cannot justify continuing our support of them, financial or otherwise. We should make this clear, and if there is no change in the practices of the regime and the freedoms enjoyed by the public end totally our support. There are, no doubt, other regimes in the world that so restrict freedom yet enjoy our aid; our policies may need questioning there too, but at least they do not impose on us the moral burden of prolonging, as a direct consequence of our aid, a bloody, devastating, unwanted war.

5. The most intense political interest of most Vietnamese at this time is not for the rule of one personality or party over another, but for peace. That is a desire that receives neither expression nor representation --



thus, one that is hard to "prove" -- in a state where (as in the North) freedom of speech and political activity on this very subject are forbidden, and candidates who might voice this desire cannot run for office, indeed, face prison. Yet is there a knowledgeable official of our government, is there an authority with first-hand experience of Vietnamese society and politics, who does not believe that a majority of the Vietnamese people would, in a free choice, prefer peace under either of the opposing governments to a continuation of this war? On the contrary, knowledgeable people who yet support administration policy find, rather, reasons why our intervention is "necessary" despite the fact that it means imposing a regime and a war upon the mass of the Vietnamese people against their desires. But the reasons are inadequate, the "necessity" is spurious, an illusion or a lie, and the policy that denies the import of these Vietnamese desires is ultimately dishonorable.

For twenty years, we have presented our involvement in Vietnam to ourselves in terms of altruism, generosity, common aims with the Vietnamese people; we have thought of safeguarding our own interests by way of safeguarding those of the Vietnamese, offering them a freer and better life than they could hope for under communist domination. Our goals for the Vietnamese people have not been unworthy: but they have amounted to fantasies hiding the reality of what it was we were constructing, as a fortress against communism: an alternative dictatorship, a succession of governments that earned the hatred and opposition of many of the most patriotic and talented Vietnamese, the contempt of most of the rest, regimes that could not attract the loyalty and support of most Vietnamese even as an alternative to communist rule. And the same fantasies hid from us the horrors being committed daily by us and by those we have upheld.

Our efforts supposedly in the interests of the Vietnamese have, in fact, delivered them to governments they can scarcely prefer to communism and to an endless, devastating war. It is time at last to deliver them from our help; from our involvement; from our concern. We can help them, at last, only by leaving them alone.

As for our efforts to serve our own interests in Vietnam, these also have failed: for it is no success, nor evidence of our wisdom, human values, and fitness for leadership, to have postponed communist rule so long at the human and material costs we have imposed on the Vietnamese and ourselves. Nor can this failure be redeemed by imposing new costs, new horrors, let alone by the new failures that are most likely if we continue. Nor can it be redeemed, or past costs justified, even by the kind of "success" described above, the best we can realistically hope to achieve.

If the regime we have supported should be supplanted by communist rule after we withdraw the props of U.S. arms and taxes, that change in itself would be no tragedy -- certainly not one comparable to the prolongation of the war -- for the mass of the Vietnamese people, though the victims under the two regimes would differ (and we have an obligation to provide sanctuary for those we have most compromised).



Such an outcome could, no doubt, lead to harsh recriminations within our own country: especially among those who overestimate the advantages offered by the regimes we have imposed upon the Vietnamese compared to communist rule, and who underrate both the burdens of continued war upon the Vietnamese and their desire for peace. But in any case, among many of our citizens there would be pain at seeing the failure of American efforts dramatized so starkly, as would be likely. The threat not only of dissension but of a resurgence of McCarthyism would be a very serious political problem with which this country might have to deal; yet it would be wrong, morally wrong, to think of postponing or dealing with that problem now by prolonging the human costs of this war.