

The chilling re-run of the Asian Follies

by Jeff Greenfield

Now that the Asian Follies has taken its smash hit on the road to Laos—it bombed in Vietnam—the au courant politically involved sophisticated can be expected to undergo a difficult series of tests concerning the War-torn Asian Kingdom (as opposed to Cambodia, the war-torn Asian republic). Don't worry. It's a look. They're giving last year's exam—and they haven't changed the questions.

It's always been an open secret that Richard Nixon has never really trusted himself as President—an example of rare good judgment. His rhetoric, for example, has been stolen from other Presidential speeches. Thus, Nixon's inaugural was a re-write of John Kennedy's, clumsier, to be sure, but striving for that ring of Presidential authority. His war speeches, for example the We Have Not Invaded Cambodia speech of April 1970,

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after we invaded Cambodia, surrounded themselves with examples from other Great Struggling Leaders ("In this room, Woodrow Wilson . . . in this room Franklin D. Roosevelt . . ."). Now, the President has pulled out the clips and is re-staging almost word for word the Vietnam scenario of 1964-1965. Memory is short, and the events of the last half-decade have blotted out the specific steps by which America grabbed the fist of Vietnam by our throat. But the parallels between the Johnson Original and the Nixon Cover Version are too chilling to ignore:

The Trial Balloon. In the

summer of 1964, in a speech to the valiant South Vietnamese Army, President Khanh (Ky? Minh? Thieu?) advocated the bombing of North Vietnam. The State Department denied any American interest in bombing North Vietnam. Six months later, we were bombing North Vietnam.

Now President Thieu (Khanh? Ky? Minh?) says the invasion of North Vietnam is only a matter of time. Henry Kissinger, our

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own Lindbergh Baby, says that is not the "dominant probability at this time" (5 p. m.). President Nixon indignantly says he will not speculate what the South Vietnamese will do "to protect their national security"—a term which implies approval of whatever they wind up doing—but says that wherever they go, American air power will follow. (Presumably, if Nguyen Cao Ky decides to wipe out the campuses at Berkeley and Madison, the napalm will follow.) The lesson is simple: America's policy equals South Vietnam's policy plus six months.

Earth and Air. The Nixon administration is saying, over and over again, that air power does not imply the subsequent use of ground combat troops. One might ask whether dozens of American helicopters hovering 18 inches above the ground isn't a bit of a metaphysical distinction. But it really doesn't matter. The whole point of first using massive American air power over North Vietnam was to prevent the use of American ground troops. It is a favorite fantasy of militarists that neat, "surgical" use of bombs, thousands of feet from the air, can dispose of two-foot-wide trails through Asian jungles. Indeed, Richard Goodwin, a White House aide at the time, later said that American planes were seen as a painless alternative to the use of infantry troops.

The facts are that air power sucked in ground troops. In Vietnam, the first raids against the North were allegedly in retaliation for blowing up the air base at Pleiku. When round-the-clock bombing was introduced, the American base at Danang was vastly expanded. Then—and here comes the slow curve—in the spring of 1965, American combat troops were sent to Danang to

... sent to Da Nang to protect the air base. Then they went out on search and destroy missions to secure the perimeter of the air base; then they started getting killed; more troops were sent; and by August 1965, President Johnson told us that "we are at war in Vietnam." Surprise!

In modified form, this is going

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to happen in Laos unless present policy changes. American planes and men are being shot out of the sky. Despite efforts to hide the losses with phony figures and by putting old serial numbers on new helicopters, the loss of men cannot be hidden. Calls will begin to come for the protection of our men. Already, Washington is saying that "Infantry Rescue teams" will be sent into Laos to retrieve downed men and material.

The Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese are going to shoot at these men. The American troops are going to shoot at the Pathet Lao and the North Vietnamese. American combat troops will be sent to protect the Infantry Rescue teams. The process of entanglement is going to grow swiftly, suddenly, without debate and without Congressional approval. And sooner or later, we will be told that "whatever our past errors, we are at war in Laos and must protect American boys."

The Sound of Silence. The Senate, where the most frequent voices of dissent have been heard, has once again been shackled by good manners. All through 1965 and 1966 and 1967, the majority of senators would say that "while I have every confidence in President Johnson who wants peace more than any man, I would hope that negotiations can begin soon." With the exception of a handful of men—Morse and Gruening and McGovern, then Kennedy and McCarthy and Fulbright—timidity was the order of the day.

The same thing is happening now. Senator Javits, who has backed and filled on Vietnam as much as any man, now is raising the question of Nixon's political wisdom. The surviving handful of anti-war senators are upset. Mike Mansfield is convinced that Nixon really wants out of Asia. But with the exception of men like California Republican Congressman Pete McCloskey, it is the sound of silence we still hear.

Incredibly, after all we have been through, the film is running *again*, and we do not see. Life Magazine endorsed the Laos invasion "with reservations" as a logical step to withdrawing American troops. Reports from Washington indicate some in Nixon's camp think they can actually win this war. And each day we are told that the South Vietnamese-American invasion is fulfilling its objectives—only each day the objectives are re-defined, from cutting the Ho Chi Minh Trail to disrupting supplies to stopping an invasion of the South. Next week, the fulfilled objective will be to prevent the Moon from falling into Puget Sound. See? There's the good old Moon, right

up there. Viva Thieu and Ky!

This is where we came in—with the assurances that we would be out any day now (by the end of 1965, Secretary McNamara told us in 1963); that South Vietnam's regime and army can defend itself soon (within a matter of months, an American official said in 1955); that the Communists are on the brink of disaster (six weeks away, said the French commanding general at Dien Bien Phu in 1954). We are watching it all again, I think, and more than any other time in my life I hope to God I am wrong.