

Life's Many Sides

The alternatives proposed by Gen. Gavin

By TON THAT THIEN

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 decision 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 Vietnam 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 metres along the 2000 kilometre-long Vietnamese-Laotian and Cambodian border?), 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 left 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 hundreds 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 Pentagon, or to talk to the GIs who have taken part in the battles of Chu-Lai, Cau-Prong, Ia-Drang and near what they have to say about being shot from behind by men who popped up from nowhere!

With regard to the enclaves...

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