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STATEMENT OF SENATOR MIKE MANSFIELD
for
ALUMNI MAGAZINE OF UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

The dominant concern in the Congress at this time is the same as in the nation. It is Viet Nam. All other matters take second place. No other single issue in recent years has prompted so much searching of the national conscience, so much probing for an acceptable course of national action.

Viet Nam is of particular concern to those young men and women who are now serving in the armed services in Asia and to the many thousands who, as it now appears, may be added to their ranks. U. S. forces in Viet Nam consisted of a relatively small contingent of 34,000 as late as May, 1965. When several of us from the Senate were there in December, however, the total had risen to 170,000. The number has since reached 240,000, not counting any part of the 70,000 men in the 7th Fleet off the Asian coast. The end, moreover, is still not in sight. As we stated in our report to the Senate last January:

"...if present trends continue, there is no assurance as to what ultimate increase in American military commitment will be required before the conflict is terminated. For the fact is that under present terms of reference, and as the war has evolved, the question is not one of applying increased U. S. pressure to a defined military situation, but rather of pressing against a military situation which is, in effect, open ended... All of mainland Southeast Asia, at least, cannot be ruled out as a potential battlefield."

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Concern over the war in Viet Nam does not end with those Americans who are presently or potentially engaged in the conflict. The war also affects most deeply and directly their parents, families, and friends. It raises, too, a double spectre for all Americans who pay taxes, which means just about all Americans. The military expenditures raise overall government expenditures and an increasing share of the taxes which pay for these expenditures must also go for defense, with the threat of adverse effects on other essential public services. At the same time, with an overheating of the economy by a rise in defense expenditures, the ever-present danger of inflation can readily grow into the reality of skyrocketing prices.

The war also raises questions about the nation's ability to meet commitments elsewhere in the world. It strains our relations with our Allies. It hovers, as a cloud, over Congress, making difficult the dispassionate consideration of legislation on other matters. Most serious, it puts a superhuman burden on the shoulders of the President of the United States.

In sum, it is apparent that our involvement in Viet Nam is more than a limited problem. It is a problem of broad national dimensions. As such, it is not a fit subject for narrow partisan politics. To approach this question - one way or another - as a potential political bonanza next November is to make a mockery of the tragic sacrifices of Americans in Viet Nam and of the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese who have suffered the ferocious devastation of the struggle.

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It is shocking to encounter in the press, therefore, some of the comment which purports to analyze the Vietnamese situation in terms of how it may best be exploited for political advantage in the next election. It is distressing to note the cynical advice to potential candidates on how to gain the greatest "political mileage" out of the Vietnamese war.

This type of partisan political chicanery has nothing in common with sober debate on the serious questions which are posed by Viet Nam. Honest differences of view have been and should continue to be expressed on Viet Nam as on any other issue - and they exist, may I say, in both parties. They should be expressed soberly, carefully, and without regard to political consequences. Indeed, such expressions have already helped to bring Viet Nam into the better purview of the people of the nation and to sharpen the focus of the government's policies.

The recent hearings of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee are a good case in point. They have provided a forum for some of the nation's most knowledgeable and able minds ^{which encompass} a whole range of views on Viet Nam. These hearings have had but a single goal in mind: how best to serve the national interest. No political group in my judgment sought to profit politically from the proceedings and none did profit. The gain was solely in terms of public and Congressional understanding and in appreciation of what the nation is up against in Viet Nam. That was as it should have been. We cannot afford the luxury of politics as usual on this issue.

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In all honesty, we must admit that the situation in Viet Nam will grow worse before it gets better. In the months ahead, the sacrifices demanded of this nation and particularly of its youth, are likely to multiply. We can do no less than channel our united energies - democratic and republican, business and labor, university and professional, and whatever -- into an effort to find an equitable and rational solution to this most difficult and tragic situation.

It may be too much to expect that Viet Nam will not be used for partisan purpose in the coming political campaign. But I do hope that at least in our own State every effort will be made to curtail this factor. That much at least is called for, it seems to me, out of consideration of the higher interests of the nation and out of a decent regard for those Americans who are sacrificing so much to uphold those interests in Viet Nam.