

COMMENTARY

By Bruce Callander

The Specter of 'Hanoi Helen'

A GROUP OF anti-war "radicals" has come up with one of those ideas so repugnant to the traditional military philosophy that the group won't even have to follow through with its plan to get the desired reaction.

The scheme, described recently in a Washington Evening Star story, is simple enough. The group, said the story, will supply taped programs to the North Vietnamese for use on Radio Hanoi as "an alternative" to Armed Forces Radio-TV which is "the Voice of the Pentagon."

The proposition, as the group explains it, seems like little more than a logical extension of the demand of Democratic congressmen for "equal time" on TV to answer President Nixon's reports on the Vietnam war.

The peace group carefully disassociates itself from the Tokyo Rose and Berlin Sally school of enemy propaganda broadcasting. Broadcasts will not urge U.S. troops to desert or revolt as did those velvet-voiced "friends" of the War II GIs.

That's not to say Hanoi would not link the tapes with its own suggestions in those directions, of course.

Nor do the U.S. people plan to violate the laws against treason or trading with the enemy. As they put it, they figure those laws apply only in wars declared by Congress. Since the SEA war is undeclared, the group reasons, any action against them could be fought on the grounds of free speech.

Some programs already have been taped and delivered to the North Vietnamese delegates to the Paris Peace talks, The Star said. These and others were to include popular music, peace songs, poetry reading, news reports, statements (including some from ex-servicemen) and discussions of such subjects as Women's Liberation, Gay Liberation, racial problems and legal advice to GIs.

Whether the militant anti-war people seriously intend to supply Radio Hanoi with all this canned talent or are only talking about it to shake up U.S. leaders is a question, but not a particularly important one. The suggestion itself is enough to create a stir.

In fact, just the names The Star story associates with the project are enough to raise the military blood pressure.

The idea of the program, allegedly came from Rennie Davis. A letter describing the project was credited to Abbie Hoffman. Both were defendants in the Chicago Seven conspiracy trials. One program reportedly was taped by Allen Ginsberg, poet and vocal advocate of drug use.

Other participants have less infamous reputations but none could be described as a close friend of the military.

What is interesting about the whole project is that, serious or not, it will cause much serious soul-searching at the Pentagon. Not many years ago, it would not have caused more than a ripple of concern. Leaders could ignore the whole thing and count pretty well on servicemen and public alike to react negatively. Most Americans, until recently, probably would have made no distinction between the broadcasts and those of the Tokyo Rose-era.

But, times have changed. Many Americans are frustrated over the long war and anxious for a quick withdrawal. Most, presumably, are willing either to support the President's timetable for the draw down or urge through the acceptable channels of government that it be accelerated.

Relatively few participate even in the most peaceful demonstrations. Fewer still side with the militant protestors. And only a comparative handful want to associate themselves with any action suggesting support for the enemy.

Still, the citizen and the government alike walk a tightrope in the question of dissent. Opposing administration policy in a letter to one's congressman certainly has to be acceptable. Most citizens would not join a public demonstration, however orderly or peaceful, but many would defend the right of others to do so.

But, where does the tolerance end? At shouting obscenities? At carrying the Viet Cong flag? At advocating in carefully selected generalizations to avoid the "clear and present danger" test for treason . . . the overthrow of the "power structure"?

Only a few years ago, Americans knew, or thought they knew, where they and the government would draw the line. Now, the limits are fuzzy, clouded not only by the variety of attitudes toward Vietnam but by broader questions of civil rights, free speech and the means of dissent. Legal, moral, religious and ethical principles are intermixed.

Thus, we have come to the point where an idea which would have been rejected out of hand until recently, gains a certain air of respectability just because it must be considered seriously.

What if the "alternative" programming of Mr. Davis and company is beamed southward by Hanoi? What response

could the U.S. make if it chose to make any?

The temptation in War II was to jam enemy broadcasts but generally they were allowed to go through. Wisely, most leaders reasoned that the blatant propaganda tended to harden the resolve of U.S. troops more than weaken it. Besides, the music was good.

Would the message from Hanoi have the same effect or would it tend to fuel existing discontent? Attitudes in and out of service cannot be likened to those of War II.

And, what of the material itself? Would it be treasonable because of the source? U.S. courts already have upheld the right of servicemen to publish underground newspapers (though they may be liable for the content on specific issues). Would the material from such a paper or from a civilian anti-war publication be acceptable in print on a U.S. base but take on a different significance if it were broadcast from Hanoi?

Another puzzler . . . Prominent U.S. critics of the war, including some members of Congress, have been quoted at length by Radio Hanoi. Would the situation be different if they recorded the same statements specifically for the enemy radio rather than for U.S. consumption?

These are hard questions, but not completely unreasonable ones in these times of national soul-searching.

It is unthinkable, of course, that the military would give anything like encouragement to the likes of Davis and Hoffman. Too, there is reason for genuine concern about the impact of their activities on the morale and effectiveness of U.S. troops, many of whom must at least be confused by the mixed national reaction to the war.

In another sense, though, the extremists on both sides of a major issue may serve a useful purpose. In effect they tend to set the boundaries for more moderate dissenters . . . the outer limits to which more reasonable people can see themselves being drawn (or pushed) by seemingly reasonable "alternatives."

Certainly it would seem like cruel and unusual punishment that the military which has had to cope with the Calley case, cost overruns, club scandals, CBS news and an internal drug crisis also might have to anticipate a barrage of incoming rounds from American radicals via Hanoi Radio.

But, if it keeps its cool and doesn't feed the opposition more ammunition by overreacting, it can survive even this.