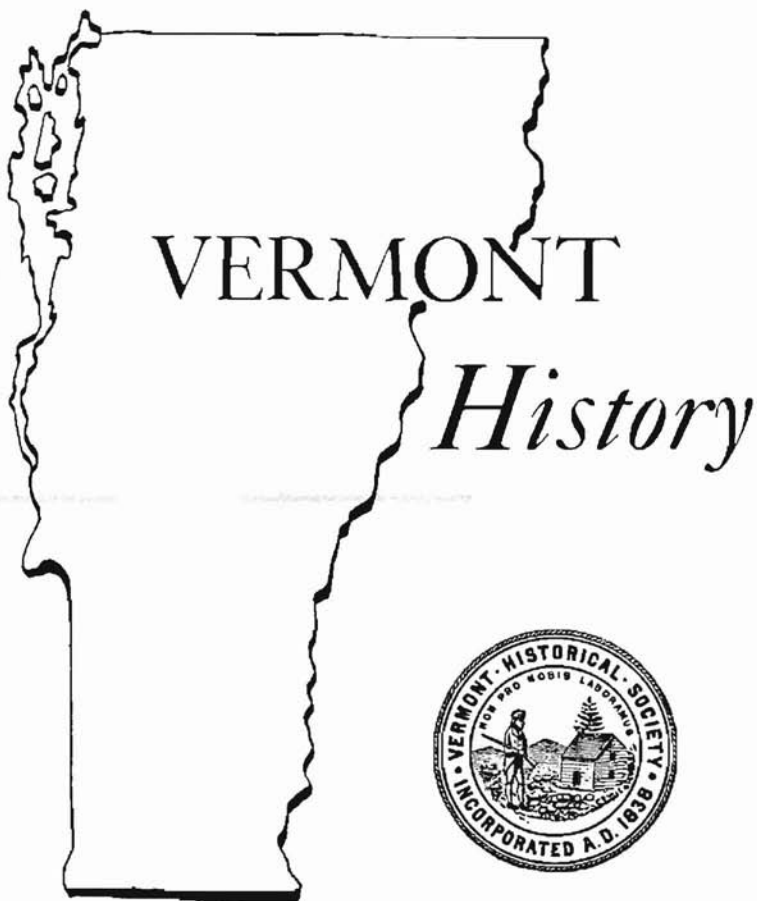


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“. . . that fame has led to an unfortunate situation whereby Aiken is applauded for a statement he never made and a position he never held."

What Did He *Really* Say? The "Aiken Formula" For Vietnam Revisited

By MARK A. STOLER

On October 19, 1966, Senator George D. Aiken of Vermont achieved national notoriety by supposedly suggesting that the United States terminate the Vietnam conflict simply by declaring a victory and getting out. Enshrined in later years as the "Aiken formula" to end the war, this "solution" attracted more and more adherents as the conflict dragged on. Throughout the late 1960's and early 1970's it was often cited as a milestone in Senate dissent against the war, as well as a classic example of Aiken's famous wit and old fashioned "common sense." When the Paris accords of 1973 were signed, many commentators concluded that the Administration had finally accepted Aiken's logic and that the Vermonter had in effect been a prophet years ahead of his time. As late as February of 1978, a student's reference to the wisdom of the "Aiken formula," in the midst of a visit by General William Westmoreland to the University of Vermont campus, brought forth massive applause from the audience. Clearly, Aiken's 1966 statement had achieved legendary proportions.

Unfortunately, there is a major problem with this now accepted version of Aiken's "formula." Simply put, George D. Aiken never said that the United States should declare a victory and get out of Vietnam. As with most "legends" of American history, this one is a gross distortion of the facts.

What Aiken actually *did* say on October 19, 1966, deserves detailed discussion. Any clear understanding of the real statement, however, re-

quires a prior understanding of both his general, long-held views on American involvement in Vietnam and of the situation which then existed.¹

The fall of 1966 found George Aiken very upset with the conduct and direction of American policy in Southeast Asia. For many years he had opposed an American military commitment to the area, thinking that it would result in a destructive failure. Asian communism, he had maintained, was an indigenous response to poverty and despair, not outside military "aggression" directed from Moscow. Attempting to combat Asian communism through military force would only result in an unwinnable ground war in Asia and the Americanization of an essentially Asian conflict. Furthermore, use of military means ran the risk of precipitating a war with China and/or a nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union. At the very least it would weld the Communist nations together at the very moment competing nationalisms eroded their bonds.

Equally dangerous, a land war in Asia would have dire repercussions within the United States. As the Korean episode had clearly shown, it would damage the economy, divide the American people, invite a search for scapegoats, and increase executive power to a dangerous extent. Ever since he had entered the Senate in 1941, Aiken had emphasized the dangers of executive power expanded during war creating a tyranny which would destroy at home the very liberty Americans claimed to be defending overseas.²

Aiken's opposition to military involvement in Southeast Asia directed by the executive had always been balanced, however, by a strong fear of Chinese expansion into the area, his belief that the United States had a definite commitment to South Vietnam, and his insistence that the President had primary responsibility for American policy. The American commitment, according to Aiken, rested on the decision to help transport hundreds of thousands of refugees to the South after the 1954 Geneva accords. That decision had left the United States with an obligation to insure the continued safety of these refugees and, thus, to prevent a Communist victory, which he held would lead to a bloodbath in South Vietnam. Furthermore, despite his life-long distrust of executive power, Aiken had for many years maintained that the President, not the Congress, was constitutionally responsible for the conduct of American foreign and military policy. Congress' proper role was to debate and define the broad outlines of that policy, to appropriate funds, and to give the President advice and consent on major issues.³

Because of these beliefs, Aiken had never advocated noninvolvement in Southeast Asia. During the 1950's he held that American goals in the area could most effectively be achieved by funneling economic aid into

South Vietnam through indigenous, anti-communist forces. As long as the President consulted Congress on the broad outlines of this policy, he should be left relatively free to implement it as he pleased.

President Dwight D. Eisenhower had held just such consultations in 1954 and then wisely rejected an unlimited military commitment in favor of limited aid through the American protege Ngo Dinh Diem. Aiken supported this decision, while maintaining his opposition to any large-scale military commitment. In 1958, he commented on the difficulty of combatting indigenous communism without giving the impression of interference in internal Asian affairs and pointedly remarked in obvious reference to Diem that the task "would be well nigh hopeless" without "intelligent and inspired natives" who were on "freedom's team."⁴

During the early 1960's, however, Diem's repressive actions appeared anything but "intelligent and inspired." At the same time, the Kennedy Administration began to expand the American commitment without Congressional consultation and, in 1963, helped in the overthrow of Diem. Upon assuming the presidency in late 1963, Lyndon Johnson renewed consultative sessions with Congressional leaders, but Aiken found these sessions to be briefings on already decided upon military expansion of the conflict rather than true consultations. Furthermore, Aiken had by that time concluded that the information given out by the Administration constituted patently false rationalizations for further American involvement.⁵ He therefore began to speak out on the Senate floor against Administration policy in Vietnam. Simultaneously, however, he continued to maintain that the United States had a definite duty in the area and that policy formation was a presidential responsibility. Given such logic, he felt bound to vote for both the Tonkin Gulf resolution, despite "grave misgivings," and for increasing military appropriations.⁶

With Diem dead, American military personnel already committed, and the Viet Cong on the verge of victory in 1964-65, Aiken obviously could not call for a return to Eisenhower's policy. Instead, he pressed the Administration for greater consultation with Congress, for unilateral de-escalation of the fighting, and for a presidential peace initiative which could lead to a settlement mediated and policed by the United Nations. By late 1965, Aiken thought that Johnson was seriously attempting to implement these proposals. Although the American military buildup went into high gear during that year, Johnson simultaneously announced his willingness to negotiate directly with Hanoi and to accept United Nations' help. Johnson also dropped the American demand for a punitive solution to the United Nations debt issue, a de-

mand Aiken felt would seriously weaken the international body, and appointed Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg as the new American Ambassador to the United Nations. Late in the year, the President suspended the bombing of North Vietnam, and asked Senate Majority leader Mike Mansfield to lead a special Senate delegation on a world-circling trip to explore the possibilities of a negotiated peace. Aiken was quickly chosen as ranking Republican in this delegation.

By late January, 1966, when the mission returned, Aiken's optimistic hopes for a negotiated settlement had evaporated. The Mansfield mission bluntly reported that the United States faced either an open-ended military commitment in Vietnam that it could not win or a negotiated settlement that in all likelihood would not guarantee American goals in the area. Furthermore, Russia would not cooperate in any mediation efforts, for Vietnam was conveniently preoccupying her two primary enemies, the United States and China.⁷ Without Soviet cooperation, the United Nations could not possibly be an effective mediator. To make matters worse, Johnson ignored the warnings contained in the Mansfield report and in late January resumed the bombing of North Vietnam.

Aiken blasted this latest escalation on the Senate floor but again maintained that the President had the constitutional authority to resume the bombing and that the country had a definite commitment to Saigon. Furthermore, as the United States teetered on the verge of a full-scale war, dividing the nation in such a situation was unthinkable to Aiken. Therefore, he voted for the military appropriations the President requested. Since Johnson had once again rejected his advice, the "most" now left to Aiken was "the hope that the President is right and that I have been wrong."⁸

Aiken's pessimism increased during the ensuing months. "If we can get out of Vietnam with the respect of the world and still insure South Vietnam will be left for the South Vietnamese," he stated on February 21, 1966, "It would be a near miracle."⁹ By the summer, a miracle did not appear to be forthcoming. Johnson responded to the Senate dissent expressed by Aiken and his colleagues by expanding the bombing targets in the North and ceasing even to brief members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.¹⁰

Mid-1966 thus found Aiken holding an increasingly untenable position on Vietnam. He insisted that military escalation would not work and should be replaced by a presidential decision to de-escalate and reach a negotiated settlement. Yet, such a settlement could not accomplish stated American goals. Furthermore, Johnson appeared to be in no mood to de-escalate, negotiate, or even listen to Senate opposition or to possible alternatives. Soviet intransigence doomed any United Na-

tions mediation of the conflict, and equally ominous hawks within Aiken's own Republican Party were pressing Johnson for unilateral escalation of the conflict.

Throughout the first half of 1966, Aiken attempted to counter these demands and to find solutions to the paradoxes inherent in the situation and his position. A speech on October 19, 1966 resulted from that search and was, in effect, a public announcement of his solutions. Clearly timed to coincide with a major strategy conference in Manila between the President and America's allies in Southeast Asia, the speech was Aiken's attempt to convince Johnson that de-escalation was both possible and necessary.¹¹ Aiken hoped the President might listen to his ideas and translate them into action at the conference.

The real reason for the massive American buildup in South Vietnam, Aiken stated on October 19, had not been the desire to stop "outside aggression" by Hanoi. Rather, it had been the need to rescue the American troops already in Vietnam in early 1965. Those troops, according to Aiken, had at that time been in "a clear and present danger of military defeat" and had required massive reinforcement to prevent such a catastrophe. The American buildup had succeeded in preventing this defeat and had thus achieved a "victory."¹²

The Administration, however, had never made these facts clear. Instead, it had rationalized its policy on the basis of stopping "outside aggression." This rationalization was not only fraudulent, according to Aiken, but was also threatening to recreate the danger of military defeat by inviting an even greater escalation with no clear military objective. Such escalation could easily result in Chinese intervention. Even without such intervention, through its massive size it was already "suffocating" indigenous efforts at national self-determination and was thereby precipitating the disintegration of South Vietnamese society. That disintegration could only lead to "a prolonged erosion of the credibility of U.S. power" in the eyes of the rest of the world. This erosion would indeed be a major defeat.¹³

The Administration could escape this predicament, according to Aiken, in one of two ways. It could continue to escalate the war "into a new dimension" in order to create "a new so-called 'aggressor' " to fight, or it could de-escalate on the grounds that the original danger of military defeat was now gone and that a new policy was necessary to avoid compromising the strategic position of the "victorious" American troops. In following this second alternative, the President would declare that the United States had "won" in avoiding defeat, maintaining control of the battlefield, and preventing any "potential enemy" from getting into a position to establish its authority in South Vietnam. This

declaration would be accompanied by the "gradual redeployment" of American forces around "strategic centers" and by the substitution of "intensive reconnaissance" for bombing.¹⁴

Aiken emphasized that redeployment was in no way equivalent to a precipitate or even to a phased withdrawal of American forces. To the contrary, those forces would have to stay in Vietnam "for some time." What the redeployment combined with the statement of victory and cessation of bombing would do was remove the issue of "face" or "credibility" as a factor precluding negotiations, force the burden of further escalation onto the enemy, and open the door to resumption of what Aiken labelled the "political warfare" which had properly characterized the early American involvement in Vietnam.¹⁵

"Senator Aiken must be joking," quipped the *Burlington Free Press*.¹⁶ He wasn't. Nor was his idea completely original. As Senator Frank Lausche of Ohio and numerous newspapers noted, Aiken had basically called for a strategic shift to the so-called "enclave" strategy enunciated earlier in the year by retired General James Gavin, but with some novel and interesting twists of his own.¹⁷

The "Gavin plan" called for a redeployment of American ground forces from the countryside to strategic strongpoints, or "enclaves," along the coast. Such a shift, Aiken realized, would not only constitute a *de facto* military de-escalation by disengaging American troops from direct contact with the enemy, but would also force the enemy into direct, bilateral negotiations if it ever hoped to remove American forces from their strongpoints. The strategy presented an effective means of bypassing the Russian roadblock to a negotiated settlement while at the same time giving the United States an important bargaining lever in any talks. If the Viet Cong and Hanoi refused to negotiate, they, rather than the United States, would be forced into open escalation and world condemnation.

Aiken's crucial addition to the Gavin plan was the declaration of "victory" based upon a redefinition of American aims in Vietnam. A strategic de-escalation to the enclaves would be worthless, he realized, without a simultaneous de-escalation of American goals in the conflict. A victory statement based upon his reasoning could serve as the first crucial step in such a de-escalation and could serve as a justification to the American people for a new strategy aimed at achieving limited results in a negotiated settlement. It would also provide a vindication of President Johnson's past actions and thus preserve both *his* credibility with the public and American credibility with the rest of the world.

Aiken admitted that his proposal might be "far fetched," but he noted that papers agreed and gave his speech wide coverage and sup-

port. On the Senate floor, his close friend, Mike Mansfield, supported the plan, while J. William Fullbright labelled it "most interesting" and "very timely."¹⁸ President Johnson, however, once again ignored Aiken's advice.

Nevertheless, Aiken continued to press his "solution" on both the President and the public throughout the rest of 1966 and into 1967. Again and again he stressed the fact that he was quite serious and that he was in no way advocating an American withdrawal from Southeast Asia. American obligations to South Vietnam, fear of a bloodbath if the Viet Cong and Hanoi won, and general Asian fear of Chinese expansion, all dictated a continued American presence on the Asian mainland for at least fifteen years and perhaps to the end of the century. Total withdrawal, he insisted, was just as unrealistic a policy as total victory.¹⁹

Aiken continued to find his advice ignored by the President. In early July of 1967, he bitterly commented that he had no further advice for the Administration, for it "would not take it if I gave it. So what is the use of wasting my breath?" But with half a million men in the field, nuclear war a possibility, and his beliefs regarding the American commitment and presidential power, Aiken would not vote to cut off military appropriations or even to rescind the Tonkin Gulf resolution. In the short run, he was forced to conclude pessimistically there was simply nothing he could do to stop the Administration.²⁰

In the long run, however, two moves appeared obvious by mid-1967: an overthrow of the Democrats in the 1968 elections and a reassertion of Congress' power to define, but not to run, United States foreign policy. As in the Korean episode, Aiken had concluded, only a new Republican administration could end the war. Throughout 1967 he pressed this point while attempting to silence the hawks within his party. Simultaneously, he called upon his Senate colleagues to resume their proper constitutional responsibilities by debating and redefining general American policy in Southeast Asia. At no point, however, did he ever call for or support a complete American withdrawal from Vietnam, or Congressional direction of policy. The "Aiken formula," he made clear, was only a possible first step in a long process towards peace.²¹

With the Tet offensive and Richard Nixon's victory in 1968, however, Aiken's colleagues began to press openly for a complete withdrawal via a Congressionally-determined timetable and to use his 1966 "formula" in support of such a move. Aiken objected vehemently and implied that the sudden "conversion" of numerous Democrats to his plan was motivated by partisan considerations. He was also angered at the distortion of his position and at what he insisted was an unconstitutional

usurpation of power by Congress. Equally important, he felt that the United States still had a commitment to Saigon and that the past could not be undone so simply. Southeast Asia remained important to national security, he warned, "if only because we so foolishly made it so."²²

What would have happened had Johnson accepted Aiken's "formula" in 1966 is, of course, impossible to determine. "If" history is always tempting, but it cannot provide valid answers to historical inquiries. In regard to the "Aiken formula," all that can be said is that George Aiken never advocated total American withdrawal from Vietnam via a unilateral declaration of victory. His 1966 statement was a serious effort to show the President and the public a way to de-escalate both the tactics and the goals of American policy in Southeast Asia to what he considered a proper and realistic level, and it was an expansion upon a previously-stated plan to accomplish this goal. Possibly, Aiken may have also been attempting to point out the absurdities involved in the existing policy, for his public statements on the war had always emphasized those absurdities. In this regard, his fame for the October 19, 1966 statement is well deserved.

On another level, however, that fame has led to an unfortunate situation whereby Aiken is applauded for a statement he never made and a position he never held. In the process, the public has lost sight of his early and serious opposition which in retrospect appears much more important than his 1966 "formula." Enunciated before Fulbright's break with the Administration, Aiken's opposition gave early anti-war sentiment a degree of respectability and bipartisanship, helped to squelch calls for more escalation by Republican hawks, and may have led Johnson to reject even wider escalation of the conflict.

It is ironic that Aiken's post-retirement fame should rest not on these important achievements, but on a 1966 position he never advocated. Hopefully, it is not too late to set the record straight.

NOTES

¹A complete analysis of Aiken's views on Vietnam requires a separate study currently in progress by the author. Aiken's comments on Vietnam span a twenty-year period. Published material includes Senate speeches, comments at Foreign Relations Committee Hearings, a 1966 report he co-authored with Mike Mansfield (see footnote 7), and his book *Senate Diary* (Brattleboro, Vt.: The Stephen Greene Press, 1976). Equally important are his numerous unpublished speeches, press conferences and interviews, and replies to constituents' letters, all filed in the Aiken MSS, Wilbur Collection, Bailey Library, University of Vermont, Burlington, Vermont. The summary of his views given in this study draws upon all of these sources. Citations are limited to specific statements or direct quotations.

²See for example Aiken's speech in opposition to the Lend-Lease bill in United States Congress, Senate, *Congressional Record*, 77th Cong., 1st sess., 1941, 87, pt. 24, 360-363.

⁷The best summation of Aiken's views on executive power is in his reply to graduate student Peter R. Chaveas, January 16, 1968, Aiken MSS, Crate 80, Box 4, GDA Views (1962-69) folder. See also his letters to Ronald Bonneau, January 11, 1962, and David Montagu, February 13, 1962, in Crate 40, Box 1, Foreign Relations 1962 folder; and to Rev. and Mrs. John H. Lever, March 5, 1964, and John Parke, March 13, 1964, in Crate 40, Box 2, Asia 1964 folder.

⁸United States Congress, Senate, *Hearings Before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee: Review of Foreign Policy, 1958*, 85th Cong., 2nd sess., February 3-March 10, 1958, pt. 1, 249. For Aiken's views on Eisenhower's Indochina policy, see transcript of Aiken oral history tape on Eisenhower Administration, 1967, Aiken MSS, Crate 55, Box 4; and Aiken to Jeannette A. Smith, May 20, 1954, and Aiken to Mrs. Paul Blanchard, June 11, 1954, Aiken MSS, Crate 40, Box 1, Foreign Relations 1950's folder.

⁹Transcript of Aiken oral history tape on Johnson Administration, October 10, 1968, Aiken MSS, Crate 55, Box 4.

¹⁰*Congressional Record*, 88th Cong., 2nd sess., 1964, 110, pt. 14, 18456-57.

¹¹United States Congress, Senate, Foreign Relations Committee, Report of Senators Mansfield, Muskie, Inouye, Aiken and Boggs, *The Vietnam Conflict: The Substance and the Shadow*, January 6, 1966.

¹²*Congressional Record*, 89th Cong., 2nd sess., 112, pt. 2, 1576-77.

¹³*Burlington Free Press*, February 21, 1966.

¹⁴Transcript of Aiken oral history tape on Johnson Administration, October 10, 1968, Aiken MSS, Crate 55, Box 4.

¹⁵According to the Burlington Free Press of October 20, 1966, Aiken said that he had originally planned to make this speech in January. As presented on October 19, the speech began by stating that the Manila Conference made his comments "appropriate" at this time. See *Congressional Record*, 89th Cong., 2nd sess., 1966, 112, pt. 20, 27523-25.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰*Burlington Free Press*, editorial, October 20, 1966.

²¹See press clippings in GDA Vietnam Speech, October 19, 1966 folder, Aiken MSS, Crate 39, Box 2; *Congressional Record*, 89th Cong., 2nd sess., 1966, 112, pt. 20, 27525.

²²*Ibid.*, pp. 27524; and press clippings cited in n. 17.

²³*Ibid.*, *Congressional Record*, 90th Cong., 1st sess., 1967, 113, pts. 4 and 10, 4870-71 and 12582; *Montpelier Times Argus*, October 2, 1967; and Aiken MSS, Aiken to Harry B. Patterson, May 9, 1967, Crate 39, Box 2, GDA May 2, 1967 statement folder, Aiken to Gerry Peet, March 20, 1967, SE Asia 1967 Out-of-State answered folder, and Aiken to John F. Adams, January 13, 1967, and Aiken to Mrs. Charles F. Cotton, January 20, 1967, Box 1, SE Asia No. 1 Vt. Corres. folder.

²⁴*Congressional Record*, 90th Cong., 1st sess., 1967, 113, pt. 14, 48370.

²⁵*Ibid.*, pt. 9, 11436-37; pt. 15, 20672; and 2nd sess., 1968, 114, pt. 1, 369-71.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 91st Cong., 2nd sess., 1970, 116, pt. 29, 38593-95.