

## *The Escalation of Lyndon Johnson*

**T**he always perceptive *Wall Street Journal* recently printed a chilling report on the mood of Lyndon Johnson and the White House staff. While the administration promises up and down — even including the Hitlerian tactic of getting written guarantees from his generals — that Khe Sanh will hold, privately they are beginning to concede that Khe Sanh might well fall to the Viet Cong. The parallels between the 6,000 Marines trapped and surrounded at Khe Sanh and the 15,000 French troops trapped and captured at Dien Bien Phu fourteen years ago, are too numerous and too close to overlook. The disastrous strong-point strategy; the surrounding by a vast majority of enemy troops; the bombardment by artillery; the reliance on airlifts to supply the beleaguered troops; the inability even to secure the airfields; even the famous enemy tunnels and trenches which bring enemy fire up to the perimeter of the fortress; all these suggest the same inevitable conclusion.

The chilling thing is that administration officials are beginning — privately — to concede that Khe Sanh might well fall to the VC. But, they are beginning to reason in the increasingly mad logic of this administration, this might not be such a bad thing in the long run. For a massacre at Khe Sanh would mobilize and unify the American people behind the Vietnam War, and would permit the president to escalate that war still further: to go to Congress for a declaration of war on North Vietnam, for greater mobilization of bombers and land troops, and, last but not least, for the imposi-

tion of censorship and the ruthless cracking down upon free expressions of dissent within the United States.

If, indeed, this is the calculation of this administration, then we are in for a rough time over the next several months. But Johnson may be miscalculating — not about the probable fall of Khe Sanh, but over the mood of the American people. Historically, the American people can be hysterically stampeded into war at the sudden *beginning* of a conflict; stampeded by their rulers, who are anxious to expand their power and might, at home and abroad. This is what happened in the Spanish-American War (“Remember the *Maine!*”), World War I (the *Lusitania* sinking), and World War II (Pearl Harbor). But let a war drag on for years and let the American public get adjusted to the continuing drain of a protracted conflict, and its increasing war-weariness and disgust cannot be overcome by rage at sudden disasters. It’s too late for that.

Meanwhile, in Vietnam, the VC continue their winning course. The permanent result of the VC offensive in the cities is as important as the drama and psychological gains of the offensive itself. For the Viet Cong are now firmly entrenched on the borders and outskirts of every city and every American military base in Vietnam, and they can shell and lob mortars into these areas at will; they can shift their attack and concentrate at will. In a deeper sense, every American enclave in Vietnam is now another Khe Sanh.