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THE ORTHODOX RABBI AND VIETNAM

With President Johnson's announcement on March 31 that he was ordering a de-escalation of American military efforts in Vietnam, we have apparently entered a new phase in our involvement in that tragic conflict. Undoubtedly widespread opposition in this country to American conduct of the war played some part in the President's announcement. Johnson's statement, and the reaction of North Vietnam will surely result in further changes in the opinions of American citizens. Whereas it is impossible at the time this is written (April 5, 1968) to predict how these opinions will change, it is surely appropriate now to review the attitudes held by various groups in our population as of March 31.

Jewish organizations, and particularly their activists and rabbis who adopted any stand on the war in Vietnam, opposed American policy and favored de-escalation and cessation of the bombing. An exception to this were a number of Orthodox organizations such as the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations, Agudath Israel, the Union of Orthodox Rabbis, and the Rabbinical Alliance of America, who adopted statements supporting the President and/or whose leaders made known their antagonism to the anti-war activity of Reform and Conservative groups. No Orthodox leader was publicly identified with an anti-war position. The only statement in an Orthodox publication opposing the American effort in Vietnam was written by the present author in *Tradition* (Spring-Summer, 1967) as a response to a pro-war article in an earlier issue. Some attempts were made by individuals or small groups of Orthodox rabbis and laymen to publicize their opposition to the war, but they received little national attention. Thus, the casual observer might have been left with the impression that Orthodoxy stood behind American policy (pre-March 31) in Vietnam.

The Orthodox Rabbi and Vietnam

In order to actually assess the distribution of opinion within the Orthodox community, a questionnaire was mailed to all members of the Rabbinical Council of America residing in the U.S. The questionnaire was conceived in February, 1968, but was not mailed until March 13th. Consequently, respondents received the questions shortly after the McCarthy victory in the New Hampshire primary and just about the time Robert Kennedy announced his candidacy. It was a period in which American opinion was apparently crystallizing against the war. Thus, readers should bear this in mind when they note the obvious discrepancy between the opinions of Orthodox rabbis and the public statements of Orthodox organizations.

The questionnaire was mailed to the 764 members of the RCA residing in the United States. As of April 2, 1968, 280 rabbis had responded. The few questionnaires arriving after that date were not tabulated in the light of Johnson's announced change in American policy. The response rate prior to April 2 was 37 per cent. This response to a mail questionnaire with no follow up is unusually high. It is the highest return the RCA has ever had to any questionnaire and reflects, if nothing else, the desire of Orthodox rabbis to express themselves on this issue. As far as can be determined, the respondents were an accurate representation of RCA members. For example, somewhat more executive committee members responded (42 per cent) than non-executive committee members (36 per cent), but this was to be expected. Twenty eight per cent of the RCA members living in the U.S. are from Manhattan, Bronx and Brooklyn, and 27 per cent of the respondents' envelopes were postmarked from these areas. Eight per cent of the RCA members live in New Jersey and eight per cent of the respondents were from New Jersey; five per cent of the RCA members live in Chicago, and five per cent of the responses were from Chicago. Thus, there is some basis for confidence in the reliability of the sample, particularly since there appears to be no reason why the questionnaire should have elicited a disproportionate response from doves, hawks, or those who supported the administration's policy.

Most of the data are presented here in raw tabular form. Time pressure precluded a more careful analysis including more ex-

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tensive cross-tabulations. Not all results are presented but only those of obvious and popular interest.

The first question asked rabbis to check the statement best reflecting their attitudes toward the U.S. position on the war.

Table 1

	percentage
The U.S. should withdraw from the war	12.1
The U.S. should try harder to de-escalate the war and/ or make greater efforts to negotiate than it has been making	53.2
Basically the U.S. is now pursuing an appropriate policy	14.4
The U.S. should increase its military efforts in Vietnam	1.7
The U.S. should take whatever military steps are neces- sary to win the war in Vietnam	16.4
Others	2.1
	n=280

For purposes of analysis those who checked the first or second items were classified as doves and those who checked the fourth and fifth items were classified as hawks. Table I indicates that Orthodox rabbis were overwhelmingly dovish (65 per cent), although more took an extreme hawk (16 per cent) than an extreme dove (12 per cent) position.

Twenty-two per cent of the respondents were not congregational rabbis. Congregational rabbis were asked whether they conveyed their position on Vietnam to their congregants.

Table 2

	percentage
I have made my position on Vietnam known to my congregants publicly	56.1
I have made my position on Vietnam known to my congregants privately	24.5
My congregants do not know my position on Vietnam since they never asked me	10.8
I have avoided letting my position on Vietnam be known	8.5
	n=212

The Orthodox Rabbi and Vietnam

Rabbis have had little reluctance to reveal their position. Interestingly 55 per cent of those who gave a hawkish answer to the first question as opposed to 57 per cent of those who gave a dovish answer made their position on Vietnam known publicly.

The rabbis were also asked to characterize their own views in comparison to most of their congregants.

Table 3 gives separate data for doves, hawks, and pro-administration rabbis.

Table 3

	dove rabbis	hawk rabbis	pro-Administration rabbis
	%	%	%
More dovish than most congregants	27.9	0	0
More hawkish than most congregants	3.8	16.2	20.0
About the same	45.9	62.2	48.0
Don't know	22.5	21.6	32.0
	n=133	n=37	n=25

Table 3 shows that most rabbis do not perceive their congregants as more hawkish than themselves. Of course, rabbis may easily be mistaken about their congregants' views. But one is still puzzled by the contrast between the dovish response of the Orthodox rabbis and the statements of Orthodox organizations and leaders. One possible explanation is that our respondents' attitude changed between the time that Orthodox organizations issued their statements and the time when this questionnaire was distributed. A second explanation is that Orthodox organizations simply do not reflect the attitudes of RCA rabbis and their congregants. If so, and we have no way of knowing if this is true, it may be because the leaders and policy makers of many Orthodox organizations are more politically conservative or more reluctant to criticize American policy than the rank and file. Within the RCA, at least, this is not the case. Of the 31 members of the RCA executive committee who responded, 74 per cent were doves and 13 per cent hawks. Comparable figures among the re-

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maining respondents were 64 per cent dove and 19 per cent hawk. Other explanations which may account for the discrepancy between opinions of RCA members and the policies of Orthodox organizations must await further analysis of the data. Factors to be analyzed include age, the religious complexion of the rabbi's congregation, and the presence or absence of other synagogues in the neighborhood.