POLITICAL CRISIS is not too high a term to describe the unprecedented American situation. Johnson still wears the presidential mantle, posing as the “most powerful man in the world”, with even less pretensions to this than the unworthy successor to Cassius Clay’s world heavyweight title. Johnson is in limbo, a discredited time-server waiting to hand over to a shadowy successor who will have to recast American policy in a world where the most powerful imperialist nation can no longer dominate. This is the most agonising re-appraisal of all; it is the logical end to the grandiose policy formulated at the end of the Second World War. While there are certain parallels with disintegration of the British Empire, the differences are striking. Britain’s decline was more gradual, more apparently inevitable; 40 years ago Ludwell Denny was able to write a book called “America Conquers Britain”.

American dreams of world domination have been shattered far more dramatically, at the apparent height of its economic, political and military power. While the real causes of this collapse were working below the surface for the past two decades, they have come to a head in a complex of economic, political and military developments.

DEFEAT IN VIETNAM is the catalyst for all these. Never, in modern history at least, has a world power suffered such a defeat in war against a small nation, and never have the consequences been of such world significance. This is a turning point of the world, ranking with such decisive events of the last half-century as the Russian Revolution, the defeat of Nazi Germany and victory of the Chinese Revolution. The Vietnamese people have been able to inflict this defeat for several reasons — world-wide support, including weighty material aid from the socialist countries, the international people’s movement against the American war and strains imposed by over-extending U.S. power.

Important as these were, the greatest contribution was the political and military struggle of the Vietnamese people which has earned them the gratitude and admiration of all anti-imperialist and socialist forces throughout the world.

The Tet offensive struck a devastating blow at the American military and political position. American officialdom tried to present
this offensive as a last desperate throw, but no-one really believed it. The Australian Communist Party's National Committee, meeting during the offensive, estimated its significance thus:

... the Vietnamese liberation forces have shattered the whole political position of the American government ... (and) exposed the civil and military policy makers not only as aggressors but also as men who have deliberately misled their own people ... the military and political situation in Vietnam now reveals the complete collapse of their whole case and the bankruptcy of the whole policy. Tribune, Feb. 14)

This analysis was verified even sooner than expected. Johnson's March 31 speech was, above all, an admission of defeat, personal as well as national.

There were other components, too; deception ("we will go anywhere in the world" and intensified bombing); manoeuvre in an effort to regain military initiative (new offensives like "Operation Complete Victory"); propaganda, to regain some credibility for the role of "defender of freedom." But admission of defeat remained the main feature.

Political and military events since have confirmed this, and widened the credibility gap. "Operation Complete Victory" was a complete flop. Designed to "clear the Vietcong from around Saigon," its defeat preluded the new and still-continuing National Liberation Front offensive in the capital. That week brought the war's heaviest US — and Australian — casualties. The Saigon puppet regime is in acute crisis, over which hovers Diem's ghost. Surely the replacement of one Saigon "Prime Minister" by another must rank among the most ridiculous puppet play ever enacted.

THE PARIS TALKS are now getting under way, with the US negotiators trying their best to appear in some role other than face-savers trying to get out with whatever they can. Representatives of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam are negotiating from positions of strength, as much moral as military. The United States is faced with the demand for an unconditional ending of the bombing and other military attacks on the North. The American effort to bargain on this appears ridiculous, for the Vietnamese are not bombing the United States, nor can they sustain any claim for scaling down military operations while they build up their armed forces and launch futile "operations."

The Paris talks can lead to negotiations only if the Americans stop the bombing — as they will ultimately have to. The negotiations may then be long and difficult, because there are vital issues that are not negotiable to the Vietnamese. Negotiations must be directed at withdrawal of all foreign troops—that is, a return to the 1954 Geneva Agreement, breached by the Americans. The
National Liberation Front must be recognised as a principal party to the negotiations, since they have popular support, obviously lacking for the Saigon regime. Negotiations are possible on how and when these principles are operated, not on whether they must be accepted.

LIKE SAIGON, CANBERRA IS DISORIENTED, confused and most unhappy. The Gorton Government is dazed and bemused by the events of the last eight weeks. Gorton, who seemed set to be the most garrulous and publicly exposed Prime Minister ever, has scarcely been seen or even heard on any substantial issue; Hasluck is even quieter. Junior ministers are left to make the statements, and all they do is show that they have learnt nothing and forgotten nothing. Perhaps Mr. Anthony, among the least intellectual of Mr. Gorton’s Ministers, expressed it best in the defence debate:

We cannot, as some would seem to desire, be isolationist and neutral ... oblivious to the ebb and flow of events ... particularly in Asia where active Communist aggression has manifested itself more openly and directly than in any other part of the world ... Australia is involved in Vietnam because there is the clearest evidence that freedom there is threatened by aggression, with our own security ultimately at stake ... We need powerful and reliable friends ... (Hansard, 2/5/68 pp.1097-8).

This brainless clinging to the ruins of a past policy bears out Newsweek’s statement that the Thieu-Ky regime, upset by the Paris talks; has formed a:

co-ordinating committee ... with the reluctant participation of Australia and New Zealand to present the US with a united front during the talks. (Newsweek, 6/5/68).

Whatever the truth of this, the need is obvious to campaign more vigorously for withdrawal of Australian troops. The Australians have already suffered heavy losses trying to preserve the United States military position that is already strategically lost, trying a political face-lifting operation on a visage sagged beyond repair. Mr. Gorton will soon go to Washington, with two aims that are really one: to find out what Washington’s policy really is, and so find out what Australia’s policy must be.

AUSTRALIAN FOREIGN POLICY IS IN RUINS. Built up so painstakingly since 1949, this foreign policy had only one pillar to sustain it — the so-called US alliance, complete reliance on a “great and powerful friend.” Criticism of this policy, came from several sources, but the crucial one is that long advanced by the Communist Party, and expressed in 1964 in these words:

... the Menzies foreign policy binds our country to the declining and most unstable and destructive forces in the world. (Resolution of Twentieth Congress, Communist Party of Australia).
Foreign policy is, today, far more obviously linked with all other political issues than ever before. As the Communist Party was quick to point out, Menzies' fatal 1965 decision to intervene in Vietnam altered the whole political struggle in Australia; it can never be the same again. The Vietnam war has already created new conditions and a new urgency for a fundamental debate on Australian foreign policy. This must be a mainly Asian policy, for reasons of geography, history and politics. And an Asian policy must be above all an attitude to the national and social revolutions that have swept across this great continent since 1945.

Put in its simplest terms, Australian foreign policy since 1949 has been based on fear of and hostility to these national liberation revolutions. This led to complete and even subservient acceptance of US policies, including non-recognition of the People's Republic of China and the final disastrous Vietnam commitment. The lesson of Vietnam must surely be the need for a new attitude, at least the acceptance of the reality of national liberation, even if not that support for it advocated by the left. And the left must assert this support much more vigorously, not just for its own narrow political advantage but because it is a vital issue for Australia.

LIKE THE BOURBONS, the right has learnt nothing from the collapse of the Vietnam policy; it is equally unable to forget anything of its ideological conditioned reflexes. The present Government is unable to produce any new ideas, and so it sticks to the old, even when they have failed. They go on repeating like parrots: "Asia is a threat; we need great and powerful friends; we have to fight them over there so we don't have to fight them here." Perhaps the US will not be so prepared to send its troops into Asia so Australia should seek a new alliance, with "free" Asia — Association of South East Asian Nations, Indonesia, Thailand, Japan that can influence the United States to remain in Asia, or at least support this alliance? Or a program of re-armament that makes the present expenditure look like peanuts, building up military strength, including nuclear weapons (as advocated by Sir Philip Baxter, Atomic Energy Commission chairman) — and of course the acquisition of that miraculous new weapons system, the F111? Or, most likely, a mixture of the two? Even the way-out lunacy of a Kent-Hughes is not impossible — a grand alliance of Australia, Japan, Taiwan, South Africa and Rhodesia.

This portends a new reactionary offensive, prepared by a barrage of racist propaganda in the new guise of the "haves" defending themselves from the population-exploding "have-nots".
Certain political straws show how the wind blows. The truly iniquitous new amendments to the National Service Act, on the pretext of closing loopholes against a "small number" of draft-dodgers and draft-defiers, scarcely seems credible in the government's public terms. It makes more sense if the government really had in mind a big expansion of conscription, the only way it can get a big army for its reactionary policy. The government has been served notice that this act will not succeed, nor will it be accepted. Rather, it widens the front of the struggle against conscription, the Vietnam war, government policy, by introducing new elements of democratic rights.

A planned reactionary political drive also explains the sustained effort to introduce a "wages policy", still continuing despite the rebuff dealt out by the metal trades workers. It fits in with the broad hints, dropped by Gorton, Bury and McMahon among others, that "we" must make sacrifices for defence and development. Naturally, it is wage and salary earners who have to make the sacrifices—capital must be free to "develop", while government must take more taxes to "defend".

It also makes more understandable, if no more excusable, the McCarthyist attacks by Attorney-General Bowen on the Association for International Co-operation and Disarmament, trade unionists and secondary school students who lobbied parliamentarians. (If it is true, as suggested, that Bowen is one of the more liberal of the Liberals, it doesn't say much for the rest). The panic fear at the visit of 120 high school students shows the government's uneasy conscience, as public reaction also exposes the ever-decreasing utility of anti-communism.

The government is uncertain, bemused and afraid, and it will react predictably by moving still further to the right. This confronts the labor movement, and indeed all who are concerned with peace, living standards and democratic rights, with big tasks. These tasks are also great opportunities, opening real perspectives for ending the 20-year rule of political conservatism. Even more exciting possibilities arise, of challenging the social basis of this conservatism, the monopoly-capitalist domination of economic and social life and thinking.

The Labor Party struggle has to be seen in this context. Much comment on the latest instalment of the cliff-hanging serial "The Trials and Tribulations of Gough" has been superficial and therefore misleading. This is partly excusable, since it is an historical peculiarity of Australian Labor Party conflicts that they
are usually fought about surface issues. Then, of course, the manipulators of public opinion who own the mass media are interested in confusing the real issues. That explains the peculiar paradox of why the anti-Labor press proprietors seem so concerned about the ALP “image” and electoral prospects.

Beneath plot and counter-plot, charge and counter-charge, move and counter-move, lie real policy differences. Whitlam’s tactical errors and personality certainly affected Federal Executive and Caucus voting, but they reflected the big issues of foreign policy, class and political alignments, the whole character of the ALP and its inter-relations with the trade unions and other labor movement trends, including the Communist Party. One newspaper commentator got closer to the issue when he correctly compared Whitlam’s stand with British Labor politician Denis Healey’s statement at the 1959 Labor Party conference. Healey said:

If you take the view that it’s all right to stay in opposition as long as your socialist heart is pure . . . It’s the people we are trying to help . . . who suffer if we lose elections . . . We shall never be able to help them unless we get power. (Quoted in The Australian 2/5/68).

This was an apt, if perhaps unfortunate, analogy that raises a very important question for the ALP left particularly, but also for the whole working class movement. What will the Labor Party do when it gets into office? Wilson won a resounding electoral victory, by abandoning “socialist principles”. In so doing, he has inflicted the worst blow on the British Labor Party since McDonald and Snowden in 1929. The accelerated decline of British capitalism was the objective cause for Wilson’s rise and for his imminent fall. The subjective cause was abandonment, not only of what was “socialist” in British Labor’s program, but even of its ideology of reforms, its claim to represent the workers and their unions and its past attitudes on Vietnam and foreign policy.

Whitlam has suffered a setback, but the struggle will continue. The rightwing groupings behind the ill-fated offensive are still intent on usurping power, and they are working to a master-plan of which the meteoric rise of former Democratic Labor Party member, Harradine, to prominence in Tasmania and to Australian Council Trade Unions and ALP executives was a shining example.

There are many aspects to this struggle, but perhaps the most important is the need to take the issues outside the necessarily narrow framework within which it has so far been fought. The real issues—of foreign policy, militant action and challenge to the present rulers of Australia, unity—and struggle must be made issues of action, discussion and debate among the people, in fac-
tory, workshop, university, in suburb and country town. In this, the left in general and the Communist Party in particular need to become more active and influential in projecting its ideas and programs of action in every sphere.

THE WORLD CAPITALIST CRISIS is becoming more acute, spreading everywhere—Britain, USA, France, West Germany, with new forces coming into action in the most diverse forms. The French political crisis, spreading to the factories and bringing the militant working class into big struggles that lend a new and vitalising dimension to student action, is particularly important. The great need of today is unity of all left and revolutionary forces. Not the out-of-date illusion of some centrally co-ordinated strategy, that only really exists in the monstrous invention of the bourgeoisie, "the international communist conspiracy", but a unifying general concept that inspires the diverse struggles of the people of all nations.

The new anti-capitalist, anti-authoritarian and potentially revolutionary mood growing among people everywhere makes still more vital the course of development in the socialist countries. The massive economic, technological and cultural achievements of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and other socialist countries, their defence of peace and material and moral support for national liberation, have placed these countries in a special position in the minds of countless millions everywhere. Despite all the hostile propaganda, that has used real socialist mistakes and shortcomings as well as bourgeois ideological inventions, millions all over the world believe and feel that socialist revolution creates the necessary conditions for real democracy, effective people's control and the possibility of a new life that combines social advance with individual fulfilment.

What is not always so evident is the bold creative urge to develop and encourage the concrete forms of socialist democracy, social responsibility and control, and individual freedoms. Clinging to old ideas, rigidity or even uncertainty as to the results of boldly pressing forward in ways that will increase socialism's attraction, can sometimes spring from a wrong estimate of world forces. If imperialism is in fact on the defensive, even confused and in flux, a bold strategy of socialist development and appeal could well ultimately exert a decisive influence on world development. It is from this analysis that Australian Communists have greeted recent developments in Czechoslovakia, and expressed their hope and belief that these will succeed.