Suspension of Standing Orders.

Motion (by Mr. McMullin)—by leave—

agreed to—

That so much of the Standing Orders be suspended as would prevent the Prime Minister (Sir Robert Menzies) and the Leader of the Opposition (Mr. Calwell) each speaking without limitation of time.

Mr. CALWELL (Melbourne—Leader of the Opposition) [3.18].—The Government's decision to send the First Battalion of the Australian Regular Army to Vietnam is, without question, one of the most significant events in the history of this Commonwealth. Why I believe this will be explained in the course of my speech. Therefore, it is a matter for regret that the Prime Minister's announcement was made in the atmosphere that prevailed around the precincts of this Parliament last Thursday. When one recalls that even two hours before the Prime Minister rose to make his statement it was being said on his behalf that there was no certainty that any statement would be made at all, it can hardly be said that the Government's handling of the matter was designed to inspire confidence or trust.

However, I do not wish to dwell on that unhappy episode. The matter before us is far too important to allow anything to obscure or confuse the basic issue before us. The over-riding issue which this Parliament has to deal with at all times is the nation's security. All our words, all our policies, all our actions, must be judged ultimately by this one crucial test: What best promotes our national security, what best guarantees our national survival? It is this test which the Labour Party has applied to the Government's decision. We have, of course, asked ourselves other related questions, but basically the issue remains one of Australia's security. Therefore, on behalf of all my colleagues of Her Majesty's Opposition, I say that we oppose the Government's decision to send 800 men to fight in Vietnam. We oppose it firmly and completely.

We regret the necessity that has come about. We regret that as a result of the Government's action it has come about. It is not our desire, when servicemen are about to be sent to distant battlefields, and when war, cruel, costly and interminable, stares us in the face, that the nation should be divided. But it is the Government which has brought this tragic situation about and we will not shirk our responsibilities in stating the views we think serve Australia best. Our responsibility, like that of the Government, is great but, come what may, we will do our duty as we see it and know it to be towards the people of Australia and our children's children. Therefore, I say, we oppose this decision firmly and completely.

We do not think it is a wise decision. We do not think it is a timely decision. We do not think it will help the fight against Communism. On the contrary, we believe it will harm that fight in the long term. We do not believe it will promote the welfare of the people of Vietnam. On the contrary, we believe it will prolong and deepen the suffering of that unhappy people so that Australia's very name may become a term of reproach among them. We do not believe that it represents a wise or even intelligent response to the challenge of Chinese power. On the contrary, we believe it mistakes entirely the nature of that power, and that it materially assists China in her subversive aims. Indeed, we cannot conceive a decision by this Government more likely to promote the long term interests of China in Asia and the Pacific. We of the Labour Party do not believe that this decision serves, or is consistent with, the immediate strategic interests of Australia. On the contrary, we believe that, by sending one quarter of our pitifully small effective military strength to distant Vietnam, this Government dangerously denudes Australia and its immediate strategic environs of effective defence power. Thus, for all these and other reasons, we believe we have no choice but to oppose this decision in the name of Australia and of Australia's security.

I propose to show that the Government's decision rests on three false assumptions: An erroneous view of the nature of the war in Vietnam; a failure to understand the nature of the Communist challenge; and a false notion as to the interests of America and her allies. No debate on the Government's decision can proceed, or even begin, unless we make an attempt to understand the nature of the war in Vietnam. Indeed, this is the crux of the matter; for unless we understand the nature of the war, we cannot understand what Australia's correct role in it should be.
The Government takes the grotesquely over-simplified position that this is a straightforward case of aggression from North Vietnam against an independent South Vietnam. In the Government's view, such internal subversion as there may be in South Vietnam is directed and operated from the North; that is to say, the Communist insurgents—the Vietcong—are merely the agents of the North, recruited in the North, trained in the North, instructed by the North, supplied from the North and infiltrated from the North.

The Government then takes this theory a little further by cleverly pointing to the undoubted fact that just as Communist North Vietnam lies north of South Vietnam, so Communist China lies north of North Vietnam. Thus, according to this simplified, not to say simple, theory, everything falls into place and the whole operation becomes, in the Prime Minister's words "part of a thrust by Communist China between the Indian and Pacific Oceans". And by this reasoning, the very map of Asia itself becomes a kind of conspiracy of geography against Australia. But is this picture of Chinese military aggression thrusting down inexorably through Indo China, Malaysia and Indonesia to Australia a true or realistic one? Does it state the true nature of the Chinese threat? Does it speak the truth of the actual situation in Vietnam? Does it tell the truth about the relation between China and North Vietnam? I believe it does not. I propose to show that it does not. If it is not true, then the Government is basing its entire policy on false premises, and I can imagine no greater threat to the security of this nation than that.

Let us first examine the case of South Vietnam itself. It is a gross and misleading over-simplification to depict this war in simple terms of military aggression from the North. That there has long been, and still is, aggression from the North and subversion inspired from the North, I do not for one moment deny. But the war in South Vietnam, the war to which we are sending this one battalion as a beginning in our commitment, is also a civil war and it is a guerrilla war. The great majority of the Vietcong are South Vietnamese. The object of the Vietcong in the war—this guerrilla war—is to avoid as far as possible direct entanglement with massed troops in order that by infiltration, subversion and terrorism, they may control villages, hamlets, outposts and small communities wherever these are most vulnerable. This, like all civil wars and all guerrilla wars, has been accompanied by unusual savagery. This war has a savagery and a record of atrocities, with savage inhumanity daily perpetrated by both sides, all of its own. We cannot condemn the atrocities of the one without condemning those of the other. We of the Labour Party abhor and condemn both, as we condemn all atrocities. I repeat: The war in South Vietnam is a civil war, aided and abetted by the North Vietnamese Government, but neither created nor principally maintained by it. To call it simply "foreign aggression" as the Prime Minister does, and as his colleagues do, is to misrepresent the facts and, thereby, confuse the issue with which we must ultimately come to terms.

The people of Vietnam may, therefore, be divided into three kinds: Those who support the present Government and are actively anti-Communist; those who are Communist and of whom the Vietcong are actively and openly engaged in subversion; and those who are indifferent. I have the slightest doubt that the overwhelming majority of the ordinary people of Vietnam fall into the last category. They watch uncomprehendingly the ebb and flow of this frightful war around them, and as each day threatens some new horror, they become even more incomprehending. And because this is so, our policy of creating a democratic anti-Communist South Vietnam has failed. That failure can possibly be reversed, but it cannot be reversed by military means alone. Ten years ago, anti-Communism was fairly strong in Vietnam. For some years, the late President Ngo Dinh Diem did represent and organise resistance against Communism. When he had support, he was brought here, feted, and seated in honour on the very floor of this chamber. When his regime, becoming increasingly corrupt and irrelevant to the needs of the people, lost that support, he was murdered. Not a word of regret, of sorrow or sympathy was said by members of the Australian Government in memory of him whom they once hailed as the saviour of his country, though, indeed some of the
Government extremist supporters outside this Parliament charged President Kennedy with having approved his murder, and Mr. Henry Cabot Lodge, among others, with actually planning it.

What support has the present Government, the eighth or ninth regime since the murder of Diem 18 months ago? It has no basis of popular support. It presumably has the support of the Army, or the ruling junta of the Army. It will fall and be replaced when it loses the support of the ruling junta, or when that junta itself is replaced by another. That has happened eight or nine times in the past year and a half. The Americans have supplied four of the governments of South Vietnam and have opposed the other four. There is not one jot or tittle of evidence to support the belief that in being sedulously fostered in this country that the local population cares one iota whether it happens again eight or nine times in the coming 18 months. The Government of South Vietnam does not base itself on popular support. Yet this is the Government at whose request, and in whose support, we are to commit a battalion of Australian fighting men. And we are told we are doing this in the name of the free and independent Government and people of South Vietnam. I do not believe it, and neither does anybody else who considers the matter with any degree of intelligence.

The Prime Minister points to increasing support from North Vietnam as being a totally new factor in the situation. I agree that the pace of North Vietnamese aggression—and that is the only term for it—has increased, though estimates as to its extent vary considerably. The Prime Minister speaks of 10,000 infiltrators last year. The American White Paper on the subject put the figure at 4,000-odd certain, and 3,000 more estimated—at the outside 7,300. And yet I am bound to say that the evidence of that White Paper does not seem to bear out its own assertions. The thesis of the White Paper was that the war in Vietnam could be fully explained in terms of Northern aggression. Yet the report of the International Control Commission, quoted in the White Paper, listed, as having been captured from the Vietcong between 1962 and 1964, three rifles of Chinese origin, 46 of Russian origin, 40 sub-machine guns and 26 rifles of Czech origin, and 26 weapons of all kinds of North Vietnamese origin. Other weapons are in proportion. All this for a force of some estimated 100,000 men who have waged war successfully for years against 500,000 troops.

Now this does not seem to me to support the theory that in past years the efforts of the Vietcong were mainly dependent on supplies from the North. And even if we accept the view that Northern support has substantially increased in recent months, it cannot lend any credence to the belief that the Vietcong effort will collapse if this new, increased support is cut off. The more the Government relies on the theory of increased Northern support, as a basis for its actions, the more difficulty it must have in explaining away the successes of the Vietcong in the past when, as it maintains, Northern support was comparatively small. If it believes that it is simply a question of aggression from the North, and that all will be solved when that aggression is stopped, then it is deluding itself, and is trying to delude the Australian people as well.

Against the background of these facts, we can judge the true significance of the Australian commitment. The Government will try, indeed it has already tried, to project a picture in which once the aggressive invaders from the North are halted, our men will be engaged in the exercise of picking off the Vietcong, themselves invaders from the North and stranded from their bases and isolated from their supplies. But it will not be like that at all. Our men will be fighting the largely indigenous Vietcong in their own home territory. They will be fighting in the midst of a largely indifferent, if not resentful, and frightened population. They will be fighting at the request of, and in support, and presumably, under the direction of an unstable, inefficient, partially corrupt military regime which lacks even the semblance of being, or becoming, democratically based. But, it will be said, even if this is true, that there are far larger considerations—China must be stopped, the United States must not be humiliated in Asia. I agree wholeheartedly with both those propositions.

But this also I must say: Our present course is playing right into China's hands, and our present policy will, if not changed, surely and inexorably lead to American humiliation in Asia. Communist China will
use every means at her disposal to increase her power and influence. But her existing military machine is not well adapted to that objective. It is not so at this moment and it may not be so for the next ten years. Therefore, she chooses other means. Yet we have preferred to look at China mainly in terms of a military threat and thus have neglected to use other, far more effective weapons at our disposal, or, because of our preoccupation with the military threat, we have used those weapons badly and clumsily. We talk about the lesson of Munich as if we had never learnt a single lesson since 1938.

Pre-occupied with the fear of a military Munich, we have suffered a score of moral Dunkirks. Pre-occupied with the military threat of Chinese Communism, we have channelled the great bulk of our aid to Asia towards military expenditure. Pre-occupied with the idea of monolithic, imperialistic Communism, we have channelled our support to those military regimes which were loudest in their professions of anti-Communism, no matter how reactionary, unpopular or corrupt they may have been. Pre-occupied with fear of Communist revolution, we have supported and sought to support those who would prevent any sort of revolution, even when inevitable; and even when most needed. Pre-occupied with so-called Western interests, we have never successfully supported nationalism as the might force it is against Communism. We have supported nationalism only when it supported the West, and we have thereby pushed nationalism towards Communism. Pre-occupied with the universality of our own Christian beliefs, we have never tried to understand the power of the other great world religions against Communism.

Each of those pre-occupations has worked for our defeat in Vietnam, and is working for our defeat in Asia, Africa and South America. And herein lies one of the greatest dangers of the Government's decision on large-scale military commitments. It blinds and obscures the real nature of the problem of Communist expansion. It lends support and encouragement to those who see the problem in purely military terms, and whose policies would, if ever adopted, lead to disaster. Here is the real risk of the world nuclear war feared by the Minister for External Affairs (Mr. Hasluck). In his speech to the South East Asia Treaty Organisation yesterday he said the third world war could break out tomorrow in South Vietnam. If the idea of military containment is unsuccessful, as I believe it will surely prove in the long term, as it has already in the short term, it will contribute to that spirit of defeatism and impotence in the face of Communism. That is the greatest enemy we have to fear.

We are not impotent in the fight against Communism. We are not powerless against China, if we realise that the true nature of the threat from China is not military invasion but political subversion. And that threat, if we believe for one moment in our own professions, and in our own principles, we can fight and beat. But to exhaust our resources in the bottomless pit of jungle warfare, in a war in which we have not even defined our purpose honestly, or explained what we would accept as victory, is the very height of folly and the very depths of despair.

Humiliation for America could come in one of two ways—either by outright defeat, which is unlikely, or by her becoming interminably bogged down in the awful morass of this war, as France was for ten years. That situation would in turn lead to one of two things—withdrawal through despair, or all out war, through despair. Both these would be equally disastrous. What would be the objective of an all out war? It could only be the destruction of the North Vietnamese regime. And what would that create? It would create a vacuum. America can destroy the regime, but it cannot conquer and hold North Vietnam, and into that vacuum China would undoubtedly move. Thus, if that happened, we would have replaced a nationalistic communist regime—in a country with a thousand years history of hostility towards China—with actual Chinese occupation, and either we would have to accept this disaster or face the even greater disaster of all out war with China.

This is the terrible prospect which people like the Prime Minister of Britain, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the Prime Minister of Canada and Pope Paul have seen, and which they are trying to avert. They all are true friends of the United
States of America, and they do not want to see America humiliated. That is why they have called for negotiations—negotiations while the United States remains in a position of comparative strength, negotiations while she is in a position to influence terms. Yet at the very time when the great weight of Western opinion calls for a pause, Australia says there must be no pause for reflection, no pause for reconsideration. The role of Australia should have been to support the call for negotiations and help those who were working towards them. Nobody underestimates the difficulties and dangers of negotiation. That is why we understood and sympathised with American efforts to secure a stronger base for negotiations.

By its decision, the Australian Government has withdrawn unilaterally from the ranks of the negotiators, if indeed it was ever concerned about them. Our contribution will be negligible, militarily. But we have reduced ourselves to impotence in the field of diplomacy. We should have been active in the field of diplomacy for a long time. But we have done nothing in that field of affairs. It is true that President Johnson's cautious call for "unconditional negotiations" at Baltimore has been rejected by Hanoi and Peking. But if we accept the Prime Minister's assurance that the decision to send a battalion to Vietnam was taken "several weeks ago", then that rejection had nothing to do with the Government's decision. For on the Prime Minister's own claim, the decision was made before both the President's offer and its rejection by the Communists.

This goes far to explain the Prime Minister's abrupt and brutal denunciation of the principle of negotiations three weeks ago. It explains his elaborate attempts to refute the bishops. Australia's aim should have been to help end the war, not to extend it. We have now lost all power to help end it. Instead, we have declared our intention to extend it, insofar as lies in our power. We have committed ourselves to the propositions that Communism can be defeated by military means alone and that it is the function of European troops to impose the will of the West upon Asia. These are dangerous, delusive and disastrous propositions. The Prime Minister pays lip service to President Johnson's call for a massive aid programme, financed by all the industrialised nations, including the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. But it is clear that the right honorable gentleman's real thinking, and that of his Government, run only along the narrow groove of a military response.

The despatch of a battalion of Australian troops to South Vietnam is the outcome of that thinking. By this decision, we set our face towards war as the correct means of opposing Communism, and declare against the social, economic and political revolution that alone can effectively combat Communism. The key to the future of Indo-China is the Mekong River delta and valley. The Communists understand this well. But imagine the thundering reply we could give to Communism if, under the auspices of the United Nations, we were to join in a vastly increased programme for the reclamation and development of the Mekong. The work has started, and it goes on, despite the war. But how much more could be done if we were really determined to turn our resources from war to peace. This surely is the key to the door of hope which President Johnson spoke of in his Baltimore speech. But this Government has closed the door and thrown away the key.

I cannot refrain from making an observation about Australia's trade with China. It is obvious that the Government's decision, and particularly the grounds upon which the Government justifies its decision, raise in a particularly acute form the moral issue connected with this trade. The Government justifies its action on the ground of Chinese expansionist aggression. And yet this same Government is willing to continue and expand trade in strategic materials with China. We are selling wheat, wool and steel to China. The wheat is used to feed the armies of China. The wool is used to clothe the armies of China. Yet the Government which is willing to encourage this trade is the same Government which now sends Australian troops, in the words of the Prime Minister, to prevent "the downward thrust of China". The Government may be able to square its conscience on this matter, but this is logically and morally impossible.

Finally, there is the question of Australia's immediate strategic concern. It is only a few weeks since both the Prime Minister and the Minister for External Affairs spoke of the need for priorities, and they both made it plain that our first priority
was the defence of Malaysia. A short time ago, the Government informed the United Kingdom and the Malaysian Governments that it was not possible to spare another battalion from our already strained resources. Now they have found a battalion for service in Vietnam. Thus, our troops are involved on several fronts. We are the only country in the world fighting on two fronts in South East Asia. America is committed to Vietnam, Britain is committed to Malaysia. Australia, with its limited resources, has obligations in Vietnam, Malaya, Borneo and New Guinea. The commitments are apparently without end, in size and in number.

How long will it be before we are drawing upon our conscript youth to service these growing and endless requirements? Does the Government now say that conscripts will not be sent? If so, has it completely forgotten what it said about conscription last year? The basis of that decision was that the new conscripts would be completely integrated in the Regular Army. The voluntary system was brought abruptly to an end. If the Government now says that conscripts will not be sent, this means that the 1st Battalion is never to be reinforced, replaced or replenished. If this is not so, then the Government must have a new policy on the use of conscripts—a policy not yet announced. Or, if it has not changed its policy, the Government means that the 1st Battalion is not to be reinforced, replaced or replenished from the resources of the existing Regular Army. Which is it to be? There is now a commitment of 800. As the war drags on, who is to say that this will not rise to 8,000, and that these will not be drawn from our voteless, conscripted 20 year olds? And where are the troops from America's other allies? It is plain that Britain, Canada, France, Germany and Japan, for example, do not see things with the clear-cut precision of the Australian Government.

I cannot close without addressing a word directly to our fighting men who are now by this decision, committed to the chances of war: Our hearts and prayers are with you. Our minds and reason cannot support those who have made the decision to send you to this war, and we shall do our best to have that decision reversed. But we shall do our duty to the utmost in supporting you to do your duty. In terms of everything that an army in the field requires, we shall never deny you the aid and support that it is your right to expect in the service of your country.

To the members of the Government, I say only this: If, by the process of misrepresentation of our motives, in which you are so expert, you try to further divide this nation for political purposes, yours will be a dreadful responsibility, and you will have taken a course which you will live to regret.

And may I, through you, Mr. Speaker, address this message to the members of my own Party—my colleagues here in this Parliament, and that vast band of Labour men and women outside: The course we have agreed to take today is fraught with difficulty. I cannot promise you that easy popularity can be bought in times like these; nor are we looking for it. We are doing our duty as we see it. When the drums beat and the trumpets sound, the voice of reason and right can be heard in the land only with difficulty. But if we are to have the courage of our convictions, then we must do our best to make that voice heard. I offer you the probability that you will be traduced, that your motives will be misrepresented, that your patriotism will be impugned, that your courage will be called into question. But I also offer you the sure and certain knowledge that we will be vindicated; that generations to come will record with gratitude that when a reckless Government wilfully endangered the security of this nation, the voice of the Australian Labour Party was heard, strong and clear, on the side of sanity and in the cause of humanity, and in the interests of Australia's security.

Let me sum up. We believe that America must not be humiliated and must not be forced to withdraw. But we are convinced that sooner or later the dispute in Vietnam must be settled through the councils of the United Nations. If it is necessary to back with a peace force the authority of the United Nations, we would support Australian participation to the hilt. But we believe that the military involvement in the present form decided on by the Australian Government represents a threat to Australia's standing in Asia, to our power for good in Asia and above all to the security of this nation.