

INFORMATION

Saturday, March 23, 1968
4:40 p.m.

Mr. President:

Herewith Gen. Taylor
supplies an answer to the question:
Is our Vietnam policy immoral?

Pres file

W. W. Rostow

cc: Mr. Harry McPherson

WWRostow:rla

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March 23, 1968

Mr. President:

In recent weeks the most frequent charge against our Viet-Nam policy which I encounter is that it is "immoral," and I have not heard any effective reply to it. I suggest the need for speakers and writers who defend our policy to strike repeated blows at this criticism which otherwise is likely to become an unchallenged cliché.

I attach a line of argument which appeals to me, some part of which might be useful to your speech-writers.

M. D. T.

Attachment:

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Is the Viet-Nam War Immoral?

We often hear the criticism that this war is immoral and I often wonder just what is meant by this. It may mean that since all war is cruel, wasteful and destructive, all war is immoral and worthy of condemnation. If that is the thought, one must demur before the evidence of history that there have been both just and unjust wars. But the critics would probably reply in that case that Viet-Nam falls in the class of unjust wars and hence is immoral.

But let us take a moment and give serious thought to what this charge means and see what truth it contains. It must mean that either the purpose, the means or the consequences of our actions in Viet-Nam are in some sense evil, unjust and hence immoral. But would this be the conclusion of honest men whose judgments of right and wrong we are willing to trust?

Before answering this question, we should first examine the American purpose in Viet-Nam. As President Johnson stated in his Johns Hopkins speech in 1965, "Our objective is the independence of South Viet-Nam and its freedom from attack. We want nothing for ourselves, only that the people in South Viet-Nam be allowed to guide their own country in their own way." That has been our objective throughout our Viet-Nam involvement and remains the objective today. It is but the most recent demonstration of our historical dedication to the right of self-determination and can hardly be deemed ^mimmoral while we continue to pride ourselves on its successful defense in World War I, World War II, Korea and elsewhere.

If our purpose in Viet-Nam is not immoral, perhaps our means deserve the term. These means assume many forms--some political, some social-economic and some military. The political means we use are generally limited to the

giving of encouragement, advice, and instruction by example by our American officials who try to guide the political leaders of this immature people in their struggle for nationhood and for independence. In this field, our efforts have been rewarded by impressive progress since the turbulent period of 1964-65 when Saigon governments were overturned every three months by irresponsible minority groups, and coups were the order of the day. Surely these American efforts to help the Vietnamese to learn and practice self-government do not merit moral condemnation but rather unalloyed praise.

In the social-economic field, our American representatives in Viet-Nam, supported by their departments and agencies in Washington, have given their guidance and help to Vietnamese officials not only in Saigon but throughout the provinces, often at great personal risk. They have assisted the rebuilding of the war-torn countryside and the improvement of the administrative practices of the central and local governments in solving the enormously complex social-economic problems of the country. Our government has provided funds for these purposes totalling more than \$2 billion in the past three years, funds which have been used to limit inflation, to bring relief to the thousands of war refugees, to assure an adequate national food supply and to permit some growth of the economy in spite of the circumstances of war. These activities and means employed in the social-political field can hardly be called immoral.

There remains to be considered the military means by which we defend the civilian population from the enemy military and guerrilla forces in order to provide security for the acts of nation-building in which we are engaged. Necessarily, many of the military operations take place in populated areas because the enemy seeks to mingle with the people in order to impress

recruits, levy taxes, confiscate food and medical supplies, and obtain the protection from our forces which their presence among civilians affords them. They know that our commanders are operating under the strictest orders ever imposed upon military forces in time of war to use every means to minimize civilian casualties and they take full advantage of this fact. It is they who must bear the responsibility for the civilian losses when, like criminals brought to bay, they shoot it out with the forces of law and order which seek to rescue the civilian hostages. But when we Americans at home see the resulting scenes of civilian suffering on our television screens, we somehow acquire the feeling that we are responsible for these unhappy events and, hence, that the consequences of our actions, regardless of our intentions, are somehow immoral.

This thought raises the general question of the good or evil of the consequences of our Viet-Nam involvement. One can best answer the question by raising another--what would have been the consequences if we had never brought our military aid to South Viet-Nam? There is little doubt that, by now, Ho Chi Minh would have achieved his life-long objective of imposing a Communist regime on South Viet-Nam in spite of the resistance of the large majority of its inhabitants. In so doing, it may be expected that he would have used the same kind of harsh, repressive measures as he did in North Viet-Nam during 1954-55. In that period, it is conservatively estimated that over 50,000 North Vietnamese were executed by Ho's firing squads and many more were put in concentration camps--and these cruelties were carried out in a stronghold of Communist sympathizers. If Ho ever got his hands on the South Vietnamese after their years of resistance to his aggression, we could expect to witness

a blood bath which would cause those grim events of 1954-55 in the North to pale to insignificance. Such, one is led to believe, would have been a consequence of our failure to bring our military forces to South Viet-Nam and the consequence would be far more disastrous if, having come, we withdrew and yielded our friends to the Communist firing squads.

In the light of these conclusions as to our purpose, our means, and the consequences of our actions in South Viet-Nam, it seems likely that most fair-minded men would be inclined to reject without qualification the charge that our course has been or is immoral. Rather, they could turn that charge against those who would surrender our purpose of bringing freedom to South Viet-Nam, renounce the pledges of help given by three Presidents and supported repeatedly by Congress, abandon on the battlefield the 60,000 Free World allies who are fighting beside us and give over our Vietnamese friends to Ho and his henchmen. This is a kind of immorality that all of us can understand, condemn, and reject.