

Preliminary Comments on a Political Strategy for Vietnam

- I. Assumption: That the present Constitution is amended to permit open and legal participation by the NLF in the South Vietnamese political arena.

a. Comment on Assumption:

It is at best a doubtful strategy to invite an assailant into your house, unless for some reason you think he can be defeated more easily in the house than outside. The Government of South Vietnam could, in my opinion, win an open election against the NLF if complete freedom of choice were possible, but we all recognize that the NLF is far more cohesive and disciplined than the various power elements which would generally support the GVN or oppose the NLF, having the inestimable advantages of clear doctrine, authoritarian organization and, above all, continuity reaching back through predecessor organizations for forty years. (Lest the reader be tempted to conclude from this that, since the NLF is the best disciplined political group organized on a national basis in Vietnam, and has the clearest doctrine, it ought to achieve political power in South Vietnam, let me point out straight away that the NLF does not have more than a modest minority of genuine popular support, and also note that in the Europe of 1938 the most cohesive, disciplined group with the clearest doctrine was the Nazi Party of Hitler, (the moral of which is obvious).

At the moment GVN power is in the ascendancy in South Vietnam. The NLF is a spent force militarily north of Saigon. Its members and followers are, among other things, rallying by hundreds each week in the Delta. In Vietnam, time is on the side of the GVN as far as the NLF struggle is concerned. As long as the NVA is substantially checkmated by GVN-US military power, the GVN will be able further to disintegrate the NLF by Phoenix, Chieu Hoi and other means. General discouragement within the NLF will increasingly diminish its ability to maintain its strength or recruit new adherents. Thus, if Allied strength against the NVA can be maintained (in whatever mix of GVN and US components), there is no advantage to be gained from giving the NLF a new lease on life by recognizing its legality and allowing its skilled cadre to practice their trade of exploitation and manipulation openly in the market place.

Recognizing the NLF is, in any case, only made desirable, if at all, because of its presumed soothing effects on confused, unconvinced, disheartened or defeatist elements in the United States. The Americans understandably wish to withdraw. They could do so if the NVA would withdraw also. The theory is that if the GVN admitted the NLF to the arena of free political competition, North Vietnam might then be willing to let the South Vietnamese settle their own affairs and abide by the result. This, of course, is the purest cant and self-delusion. The fact is that North Vietnam, like the NLF, has not the slightest interest in free political competition. It is interested only in victory - a complete, unadulterated takeover of political power in South Vietnam. It is not interested in self-determination for the South Vietnamese population, because, as in any militant political religion, the important thing is not what the people want but what is "good for them."

Thus, to conclude this comment, it seems difficult to deny the correctness of the traditional GVN position, which is to invite the NLF as individuals to rally to the GVN side and then join in political competition, but to continue the constitutionally outlawed status of the NLF as a political entity.

II. Courses of Action - Saigon Level

The situation in South Vietnam, Paris and Washington seems to be changing so fast from day to day that any paper written today will seem overtaken by events tomorrow. Some of this apparent rapid change is illusory, however, because certain constants remain. The essential positions of the two Vietnamese antagonists have not really altered. Hanoi-NLF still intends to take over everything; Saigon still intends to remain master of South Vietnam. How can Saigon hope to maintain its position and achieve its objective of total self-defense if the NLF (backed by Hanoi) is admitted to legal political competition in Vietnam?

The overall answer illustrates a time-worn truth in Vietnam. It has always been relatively easy to identify problems there; it has only been slightly more difficult to devise plans to overcome the problems - which accounts for the striking similarity of all the supposedly new pacification plans since 1954, and even before, which all boil down to "providing security and services." The crux of the matter has always been execution. Similarly, the problem before us now is straightforward enough: To prevent the better organized NLF from using its organizational advantages to win in "free" political competition. The general solution to the problem is hardly more obscure: To obtain a united front of non-Communist political elements against the NLF, something that President Thieu is trying to do already. The difficulty, as always, will lie in the execution of the solution.

Is a non-Communist political front in South Vietnam a delusive hope, or something within the boundaries of the real world? The answer is that such a front could be forged for a certain period of time, but will not be if we and the Vietnamese do not go about it in the right way. What general principles govern the outcome?

a. The divergent South Vietnamese political elements - or a majority of them - cannot at this time be forged onto a united front for anything (other than generalizations about a greater Vietnam which are relatively meaningless), but they can be united against something. They could not be inspired to work together creatively to build anything at this juncture, but they could be persuaded to join forces in opposition to the common enemy - the NLF - by playing on their fears and instincts of self-preservation.

b. Even as the non-Communist political elements cannot be united at this time for anything, still less can they be united for anyone. There is no real comprehension in Vietnam that the President is not the same as the Presidency, and the divided political elements will not unite behind Thieu as a symbol while continuing to oppose him as a man. So President Thieu, who is the key figure in forming any non-Communist front, must emphasize, as he has been doing, that the united front is not to be a personal vehicle of his own, or pledged to

support him as an individual.

c. The Americans, if they speak with one voice, can help as a catalyst in forming the united front. If they speak with many voices, they would be wiser to remain out of the picture. Their approach should also recognize the reality of the two factors noted above. We should not delude ourselves with bright hopes that three factions of Buddhists, two factions of Catholics, several cliques of Dai Viets, VNQDD, Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Southerners and Northerners are going to be able to get together on a positive program - other than generalities - in 1969 when they have failed to do so since 1954.

Principles of Execution

1. President Thieu must deal personally with all the leading non-Communist political factions in South Vietnam. He cannot succeed if he acts through intermediaries and underlings as he has been doing to a large degree to date.
2. He must ask the various elements to form a political front for a specified and limited period of time only, say two years renewable.
3. The front is required to agree on one point only: Absolute and automatic opposition to the NLF. All other specific questions will remain open and negotiable. The usual positive generalizations will be given due obeisance, of course.
4. It will be desirable to specify, within the front, exactly what are the key issues on which united action against the NLF is to be mandatory, i.e. certain elections, nominations for key administrative posts, etc.
5. The Americans must speak with one voice only. This might imply having all conversations with all leading political elements conducted by Ambassador Bunker only, with him emphasizing that no other Americans are authorized to speak for him. (Vietnamese always seem to assume that the US official with whom they are talking at any moderately senior level is necessarily conveying US policy, and since different Americans say different things to different Vietnamese, much confusion can result. The Vietnamese also believe firmly in the myth of total US influence over Vietnamese internal politics, despite the fact that only a handful of Americans have ever even approached reasonable competence in their comprehension of Vietnamese politics and politicians, and even their influence on Vietnamese behavior has been limited. Still, this American "influence" becomes an inescapable reality for the sole reason that the Vietnamese believe so unshakably in its existence, and should therefore be used as constructively as possible.) Another solution would be for Ambassador Bunker to authorize only a small handful of selected individuals to purvey the US attitude, all speaking from one clear text.

The American position as conveyed in these meetings with Vietnamese political figures should be the same as President Thieu's, but not in support of President Thieu by name, (nor, of course, against him). The essential themes are:

- a. The need for united action against the NLF as a measure of self-defense. "Hang together or hang separately, etc."
- b. The united front need not have one view as to anything else, or support any predetermined candidate or policy.
- c. US involvement in Vietnam will inevitably decrease gradually, so the Vietnamese political factions must not delay in forming their common protection against the NLF, etc. Time is of the essence.

The foregoing is all simple enough in theory, as Vietnamese problems usually are. The crux is execution. There is no magic solution that will solve everything and obviate the necessity for skillful handling of the Vietnamese by President Thieu and the American side. There are no systems - computerized or otherwise - that will take the place of good judgment and sophisticated handling. No resources, financial or material, can buy our way out of the need for skill and experience. In short, we have to act again now in Vietnam as we have had to act all along, but so seldom have.

3. Courses of Action - Rural

The principal problem in rural Vietnam since 1954 has been the politico-administrative vacuum in the countryside which has enabled the organized Viet Cong movement to subvert areas not directly protected by GVN military and police power. The filling of this politico-administrative vacuum is what is required to deny the rural areas to the enemy and to mobilize the areas into fighting to win the war in the countryside on the side of the GVN. Theoretically, this politico-administrative vacuum could be filled either from the bottom up -- that is to say by local development in rural areas -- or by political action flowing from the center down, or a combination of the two. This paper takes the clear position that we should concentrate on the first solution -- namely, local development at the village level. The feasibility of denying an area to the Viet Cong by reason of local filling of the politico-administrative vacuum has been amply demonstrated in the case of An Giang. There a local group, which happened to be Hoa Hao, successfully preempted the area and denied it to the Viet Cong, thereby establishing a condition of non-Communist peace illustrative of what victory elsewhere in rural Vietnam could resemble. It is particularly noteworthy that this filling of a local vacuum did not derive from any particular action taken by the center. National programs of assistance to An Giang were helpful, and the national military and police power was necessary to prevent outright invasion of the province, but the problem of local subversion was solved by local development. The same thing can be done in different ways in other parts of the country.

The principle of local political development not essentially a result of action at the center is entirely consistent with Vietnamese tradition and history. Vietnam was never developed by central governments. Its expansion to the South and its encroachments upon Cambodia were accomplished primarily by the gradual expansion of local communes or villages acting on their own.

The lesson to be drawn from the foregoing is submitted to be that in the rural areas, our best hope of denying political power to the NLF, particularly in the short run, is by building of local non-Communist strength rather than by waiting for the creation of a national political movement from the center comparable to the NLF. In this game the NLF, with its predecessors, has a forty-year head start, a clear ideology and trained cadre. No GVN political party or parties could hope to achieve a political organization of equal efficiency on a nationwide level in the near future, even if a non-Communist anti-NLF front is formed.

How is local non-Communist strength in the rural areas to be constructed? I believe President Thieu's policy statement made at Vung Tau on April 21 points the way -- by giving power, a budget, and armed forces to elected village officials. President Thieu's program is both simple and clear -- the proven prerequisites for any successful operation in Vietnam. It includes recognition and support by the central government of locally elected officials. We should not aim at perfectly articulated plans. We should, on the contrary, sort out the essential elements such as the clear authority of village officials, and the simple availability of a budget, but we should not attempt to foist instant utopias on the Vietnamese. We should not push for complex programs of economic development. We should simply establish the power of local elected officials, the availability of the budget, authority of local security forces, and the accounting to the people of the village for funds spent. It is not really important what projects the village wants. The only important interest is political and psychological -- that the people develop something that belongs to them and that they have a reason to defend against outside subversion, and that central organization accepts and supports their duly chosen leaders.

Obviously a considerable degree of "democratic centralism" will be required to get a village program established, but once it has taken root it must be protected against District Chiefs and Province Chiefs who will tend to exact tribute in one form or another. This protection can probably best be accomplished by a senior and powerful inspectorate operating from the center or corps levels.

Some may argue that the new village administrations could become communist villages. The tendency would be against this. The Vietnamese peasant, like most peasants, is conservative and anxious to own wealth or land. He will not adopt communism by free choice. The new villages will initially depend on the central government for budgetary assistance until local taxation has been developed to assume the most of the burden, which will give the central government predominant initial control. In any case, communism is outlawed by the Vietnamese constitution, and the police power could be constitutionally applied as necessary.

Conclusion

By way of summing up these preliminary and general comments, the formation of a united front at the center and the development of village self-reliance are submitted to be the principal lines of action open to the GVN and ourselves to counter NLF political competition. The Corps and province levels are administrative rather than party echelons, where the GVN can continue to exercise its authority. The link-up of village to province to center in terms of national political movements is inevitably a matter for the more distant future, not because we want it that way but because that is the way it is.

Obviously, detailed consideration of the organization of the united front and practical measures necessary to establish the new villages must be done primarily in Vietnam and are not within the Purview of this paper. Still it is useful to establish a very clear consensus of what it is we are trying to do. In Vietnam at least, the beginning of wisdom is that nothing will work unless it is simple and clear. This brief paper has attempted to contribute towards such simplicity and clarity.

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