

March 13, 1980

Dear Mike,

Your letter about the Malaya book I sent you raised a lot of perceptive questions. Since you are interested, I will comment. First, Malaya became Malaysia at the time of independence, because the new country included places that had not been Malaya, namely Sarawak and Sabah on the island of Borneo. The new name could include them. Now, regarding your comparisons to Vietnam. Malaya was indeed a political war, but so was Vietnam. That was why some civilians like me were always emphasizing to whoever would listen that the war should be run by the political types, not the military. The answer always was (1) that the President had made the decision to put the war under the military commander, so there was nothing to do about it, and (2) in terms of manpower and resources, the military could always take more effective action. An example, USAID had had technical advisors helping the GVN to run its important port facilities in the Saigon area. Eventually, however, backlogs inevitably occurred as the war built up the quantity of shipments. The US military was able to say, we can put in x transportation battalions complete with trucks, trains or whatever, take over complete control of the port and clear the backlogs in x days. All very persuasive. In fact, however, as we constantly won battles but never seemed to win the war, it became evident to all what I had once written to Gen. Dick Stilwell in 1964 - before the buildup - that what Americans did might be useful, but what Vietnamese did was crucial, since one day we would be leaving Vietnam in any case, and the success of all our efforts would depend solely on what we left in place and whether it succeeded. Thus "Vietnamization" was reinvented, and it was the right idea - always had been - and might have worked if we had continued that indefinite, but limited, degree of material support that the Soviet Union and China never failed to give to North Vietnam. Anyway, on this subject I shall enclose a letter I wrote to Amb. Bunker and left with him when I was called in to see him before leaving Saigon in 1969, if I can find it.

Your point about the fact that the British were in place in Malaya is also well taken. It is impossible to conduct any successful struggle of this type without two things: First, what I called "doctrine", namely a clear statement of what ones objectives and purposes are, and one's various strategies for accomplishing them, and second, trained cadre who know what the mission is and have the skills to implement the program. The British had both aspects in Malaya, and were enormously helped by the British tradition, a hundred years old, of training and putting in place well-trained civil and security services in their colonies. The British system was to admit the "natives" to all but the highest levels of the administrative services, giving them good pay and high prestige. India and Malaysia today still benefit from this legacy. In the French colonies such as Vietnam, by contrast, the French staffed the administrative services, police etc. with Frenchmen down to the fairly low levels, paid them miserably - and still more so the natives at the still lower levels. This left a legacy of administrative incompetence and also corruption - since no one could live solely on the low official salaries and literally had to squeeze or moonlight in some way. Thus in Vietnam, as some of us used to say, we would have been better advised to spend some years totally reforming and retraining the civil service, and only then bringing in the enormous resources which they were supposed to administer.

Again, as you perceptively note, the situation in Malaya was much easier. There were much smaller numbers involved. All the insurgents were Chinese, with very few exceptions, in a country where the numerical majority were Malay, so you already had your enemy half identified at the very start. Again, except for the contiguous border with Thailand, the Malay peninsula had sea on both sides and could be patrolled, as in Korea. In Vietnam, infiltrators from the north came happily down through Laos and Cambodia and debouch into South Vietnam anywhere along a thousand-mile frontier, secure in the knowledge that Jane Fonda and Jerry Rubin would tie up the American government if anyone tried to stop them by "violating" the sovereignty of those countries, etc. In Malaya, there was no contiguous sanctuary which provided an endless stream of men and material, backed by contiguous China and, further off, Russia. In retrospect - and this was a point I did not clearly perceive when I was in Vietnam - it was silly to fight the war in South Vietnam where in fact we had no major enemy, rather than in North Vietnam where he lived and came from. It was a little like fighting WW II only in France, leaving Germany as a privileged sanctuary except for occasional bombing. It would still be going on!

Finally, as the British themselves admit, they could not have won if they had not promised independence to ~~the~~ Malaya, to occur at the end of the "emergency". This was not a problem in South Vietnam, as it already was independent, but it would have been a major consideration in the French war in VN. If the French had promised unconditional independence to the Vietnamese after the defeat of the Viet Minh, they might well have garnered enough popular support - as the British did in Malaya - to have won. But perhaps, after many betrayals, the Vietnamese in the later stages would never have believed the French no matter what they said.

I now find that I have located my letter to Amb. Bunker, and also a paper on the VN experience I wrote in 1971. The former was never replied to by Bunker, who may have been miffed at remarks which he could have perceived as being critical of his performance, although they were really only critiques of his assigned role. The paper, I immodestly suggest, contains more practical wisdom than anything you have yet read about Vietnam. I hope you will take the time to read it, as you will see many comparisons with Malaya, some of which I have noted in the margin. You can show it to anyone interested (not the letter to Bunker), and then please return as it is one of very few copies.

I guess I have gone on too long. I have been in both NH and Fla. campaigning for Bush by door to door and telephone bank. Needless to say it has been a lost, if good, cause so far. I fear for Bruce on the same grounds: Can he, unlike Bush, establish some identity of interest with the masses, the blue collar voter, etc. Bush is an elite type, effortlessly recognized by his own kind, but viewed as a man from another planet by the masses. FDR established a connection over the screaming bodies of the more privileged classes. Bush hasn't. Maybe it is also just a matter of personality in Bush's case. He concentrated too much on political technique and "momentum" while Anderson hit the issues and Reagan the people.

*All the best*

*John*