

Feb. 19, 1982

Dear Mr. Cohen,

I read your column entitled "Questions" in the Post of Feb. 18 and feel constrained to reply to it, not on the subject of El Salvador about which I claim no special expertise, but as regards your references and comparisons to Vietnam, about which you hold strong opinions which seem to me to be singularly uninformed and distorted to the point of being both unprofessional and deceptive to such of your readers who may be as uninformed as you evidently are.

In attempting to comment on each of your specific views, may I say that I do so with little hope of altering your conventional wisdom, which is obviously deep-seated. Like other people I have known on the opposite side of this issue, you come through as one often in error but never in doubt. My own qualifications for commenting are that I spent more than six years in Vietnam as a civilian, was familiar with every part of former South Vietnam and had a host of friends there among all levels of the population, and was also familiar with the American personalities, programs and purposes involved.

(1) Why were we there? After WW II (in which I took part in the war against Hitler), we were reluctantly confronted by a new Fascism of even greater virulence characterized by the successive takeovers of all the nations of eastern Europe, for a start. You recall Churchill's phrase about the Iron Curtain. Well, it divided Germany, Korea, Vietnam. When the Hungarians, Czechs, Poles, East Germans each in turn attempted to throw off the new tyranny, we did not intervene with military force. The regrettable rules of the game came to be that those areas were on their side of the Iron Curtain. To bolster up western Europe against real threats from the other side, we came up with the Marshall Plan. I presume you can understand that. We came up with the Truman plan in Greece and Turkey. I presume you can understand that. And when the North Koreans invaded South Korea, we responded and I guess you can understand that. South Vietnam was a very similar case. The people there did not want the French, but they also did not want a communist takeover imposed by North Vietnam - which was what the struggle was all about. Since the communist victory of 1975 - which people like yourself did so much to achieve - the people of former South Vietnam have voted against the new Fascism by leaving the country in a flood, something they never did under the regimes of Diem, Minh, Ky, Thieu etc which you regard as so repulsive.

(2) We fought on the side of the most reactionary elements in that society, etc. Here I suggest you are so unprofessional as to be really silly. Are you aware that when the US helps a country, it has little choice but to act through whatever are the instrumentalities of government there? This is true in all countries, and has been in some cases a major dilemma for US aid programs around the world. But you are also unprofessional in your characterizations of the various South Vietnamese regimes, even fully acknowledging their deficiencies. For one thing, until North Vietnam deliberately started their campaign to overthrow South Vietnam from about 1953 on, South Vietnam was a very going concern indeed. Its economy was starting to boom, with exports of rice and a rapid growth of local industry, schools, social

services and even, a new and gradually increasing structure of representative government - a new experiment in that part of Asia. But then came the pressures of terrorism, sabotage, assassinations and war - and I witnessed the great work of the Viet Cong in these respects and know whereof I speak - and the successive South Vietnamese governments had to do what any government would have to do in such circumstances, namely establish a martial law regime. I regard the distaste and derision with which people like yourself condemned out of hand a society of which you were so profoundly uninformed to be a case of ignorance exceeded only by hypocrisy. Denis Warner, the Australian journalist who really knew Southeast Asia, has written that South Vietnam was incomparably the freest nation in wartime that he had ever lived in. I can thoroughly endorse his sentiment. Can you imagine that Ngo's speeches were carried in the Saigon press at a time when North Vietnamese regulars were operating from Cambodian sanctuaries only 35 miles from Saigon?

Lest you leap to the comfortable conclusion that I am some sort of barking rightwinger, may I add that I have always been a registered Democrat. My political ideal has always been that of George Orwell - the author of both the Road to Wigan Pier and Animal Farm. I commend him to you for what you might be able to absorb of professionalism, realism and integrity.

Sincerely, .

Ben Williams

Ben Williams

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PS Your notions of the "domino theory" are as ill-founded as the other preconceptions you seem to have about Vietnam. In fact, of course, the theory worked to perfection after 1975 geographically. Cambodia and Laos are now both thoroughly controlled from Hanoi. If you had done your homework, you would know that such had been the stated goal of the Indochinese Communist Party since 1930. And the "domino theory" has worked perhaps even more effectively in the moral sphere, all around the world, leading to the Afghanistans and the Polands to name but a few places. I suppose, however, that the anger that has led me to waste this much time writing to you derives mainly from my sense of the enormous disservice people like you have done to this country in helping to persuade so many Americans that there was somehow something shameful in trying to help small countries avert the entirely predictable disasters that in fact befell the countries of Indochina in 1975 - the genocide of the Hmong in Laos, the boat people risking, and finding, death to avoid the new Fascism in Vietnam, and all the tide of refugees who, by their actions, have made a mockery of your smug wisdom.

8w.