

(This letter never answered nor
acknowledged)

March 23, 1986

Rev. William Sloan Coffin,
Riverside Church
New York, N.Y.

Dear Mr. Coffin,

We may have met once. I recall attending a party given by someone in the American community in Munich in 1951, where a young man was playing a balalaika and singing in Russian - and practically any other language it seemed - named Bill Coffin. Then last night, thirty-five years later, I heard you once again, albeit without balalaika, on a public radio broadcast here in Washington, DC. You offered the valuable insight that activists included those who acted out of hate as well as out of love, in the context of the Vietnam anti-war movement in which you played such a prominent part. As fate would have it, I spent many years in Vietnam between 1956 and 1975, mostly with A.I.D., trying equally to do good as I saw it, which for me was to prevent precisely the terrible fate that has overtaken the peoples of Indochina since 1975.

Reflecting on our different roles, I was reminded of the ancient problem of resistance or non-resistance to evil. I remembered Gandhi had said that if non-violence did not work, then he would prefer even violence rather than capitulation to evil. I thought that whereas you saw your struggle against violence and war as being unquestionably good, I for my part could only see it in terms of its end results, the visitation of incomparable evil and suffering upon small nations, unwilling peoples, exile of millions, concentration camps and the extinction of three ancient cultures and religious traditions of enormous beauty and grace. To me in Vietnam all those years, your anti-war campaign back home flew in the face of two truths - first, that no ideal and no truth can survive in the jungle of the world unless someone is out there fighting for it, peacefully when possible and in arms when unavoidable, and second, the well-known observation that nothing more is required to assure the triumph of evil than that good men should do nothing.

It seems uncontested to me that 1975 saw the triumph of evil in Indochina. To me, the mass flights of refugees voting with their feet and often dying in the process, the so-called re-education camps, the seizures of Cambodia and Laos, the suppression of ancient cultures and religions, the totalitarian police state, the massive poverty, cruelty and loss of human dignity which have characterized Hanoi's rule since 1975 all make it simply grotesque to pretend that good resulted from the failure of the Allied efforts in Indochina. With respect, it seems to me that your goodness and your sincerity in fact abetted greater evils than the evils you sought to overcome.

You may contend that the problem was not Hanoi's drive to place South Vietnam, and also Laos and Cambodia, under its own communist dictatorship (an aim, incidentally, explicitly stated in the manifestos

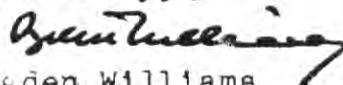
of the Indochina Communist Party as far back as 1930), but rather our and our allies armed resistance to it. I concede that it is true that perhaps 100 million lives could have been saved if Britain, France, Russia, etc. had peacefully accepted Hitler's domination of Europe, and Japan's of Asia. But this contention implies the premise that physical survival is the only value, or at least that peace is always better than violent resistance. I would suggest that the traditional freedoms of the West and the independence of many nations survive today precisely because, and only because, people were willing to fight for them in World War II. I further believe that the same issue presented itself in Southeast Asia. Some 200,000 South Vietnamese died in battle for it, now lying in deliberately desecrated graves.

I should like to mention one particular situation of relevance to these thoughts that I have presumed to inflict on you !

During my last full tour in Vietnam from 1966-69 I had the honor, as a senior AID official to head up, on the US side, the AID-financed amnesty program for Viet Cong, sometimes called the "open arms" program. During my tour alone some 60,000 young men and women came in, 48,000 of them being armed VC combatants. Thus about nine divisions were removed from the battlefield without loss of life on either side. It meant, on our side, a saving of about 10,000 American and South Vietnamese lives. The overall total of returnees, known as Hoi Chanh, for the entire life of the program from 1963 to 1975 was about 200,000. When the North Vietnamese tanks entered Saigon in 1975, one of the victors' first tasks was, as we now know, to track down the Hoi Chanh and return them to the rural areas from which they had defected, where they were either immediately killed in 1975 or consigned for life to inhuman labor camps where some still survive to this day.

I mention this specific case as relevant to the subject of guilt, in this case mine. It was not enough for me to help offer amnesty and a reprieve from war unless I was also prepared to protect them, later on, from the consequences of accepting the offer. Nor, I respectfully submit, was it enough for you to oppose war unless you were prepared to protect innocent people from the consequences of losing that war, which was the concomitant of your efforts. I am sure we both tried to do good as we saw it, but I fear we both have blood on our hands - mine for trying but not succeeding, you for turning your back on those who were trying, and their cause.

Respectfully,


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