

Background For Commanders

Struggle in Vietnam Part of Worldwide Conflict^{*}

Like most of the conflicts that have plagued the world in recent years, the conflict in Vietnam is a product of the great shifts and changes triggered by World War II. Out of the war, two continent-wide powers emerged—the United States and Soviet Union. The colonial systems through which the nations of Western Europe had governed more than a third of the people of the world were, one by one, dismantled. The Soviet Union under Stalin embarked on a reckless course of seeking to extend Communist power.

This process threatened the freedom of the world. It had to be checked and checked quickly. By launching the Marshall Plan to restore economic vitality to the nations of Western Europe and by forming NATO—a powerful Western Alliance reinforced by United States resources and military power—America and the free nations of Europe built a dam to hold back the further encroachment of Communist ambitions.

When we think of Vietnam, we think of Korea. In Vietnam, as in Korea, the Communists in one part of a divided country lying on the periphery of China have sought by force to gain dominion over the whole. But in terms of tactics on the ground Greece is a closer analogy. For there, 20 years ago, as in South Vietnam today, the Communists sought to achieve their purpose by what is known in their lexicon as a "war of national liberation."

War in South Vietnam

Is the war in South Vietnam an external aggression from the North, or is it an indigenous revolt? This is a question that Americans quite properly ask—and one to which they deserve a satisfactory answer. It is a question which we who have official responsibilities have necessarily probed in great depth. For if the Vietnam war were merely what the Communists say it is—an indigenous rebellion—then the United States would have no business taking sides in the conflict and helping one side to defeat the other by force of arms.

The evidence on the character of the Vietnam war is voluminous. Its meaning seems clear enough—the North Vietnamese regime in Hanoi systematically created the Viet Cong forces; it provides their equipment; it mounted the guerrilla war; and it controls that war from Hanoi on a day-to-day basis.

Some thoughtful critics of our Vietnamese policy maintain that the West should not undertake to defend the integrity of all lines of demarcation even though they may be underwritten in formal treaties. They contend that many of these lines are unnatural since they do not conform to the geo-political realities as they see them.

Proponents of this view advance two principal arguments to support their thesis. They contend that

the very weight of Chinese power, its vast population, and its consequent ability to mobilize immense mass armies entitles it to recognition as the controlling force of Southeast Asia. As a second reason for acknowledging the Chinese hegemony, they contend that for centuries China has maintained a dominant cultural and political influence throughout the area. This argument, it seems to me, does not provide an acceptable basis for United States policy.

Nor can one seriously insist that geographical proximity established the Chinese right to dominate. At a time when man can circle the earth in 90 minutes, there is little to support such a literal commitment to 19th Century geo-politics.

We have no ambition to stay there (in South Vietnam) any longer than is necessary. We have made repeatedly clear that the United States seeks no territory in Southeast Asia. We wish no military bases. We do not desire to destroy the regime in Hanoi or to remake it in a western pattern. The United States will not retain American forces in South Vietnam once peace is assured. The countries of Southeast Asia can be nonaligned or neutral, depending on the will of the people.

We Uphold Freedom

In the long run our hopes for the people of South Vietnam reflect our hopes for people everywhere. What we seek is a world living in peace and freedom—a world in which the Cold War, with its tensions and conflicts, can recede into history. We are seeking to build a world in which men and nations will recognize and act upon a strongly shared interest in peace and in international cooperation for the common good.

We should not despair of these objectives even though at the moment they seem rather unreal and idealistic. For we would make a mistake to regard the Cold War as a permanent phenomenon.

The changes taking place within the Soviet Union and among the nations of Eastern Europe are at once a reality and a promise. Over time—and in a world of rapid and pervasive change the measurement of time is difficult indeed—we may look forward to a comparable development within Communist China, a maturing process that will deflect the policies of Peiping from bellicose actions to a peaceful relations with the rest of the world.

After all, it is not the American purpose simply to preserve the *status quo*. That was not our history and that is not our destiny. What we want to preserve is the freedom of choice for the people of the world. We will take our chances on that.

^{*} (Excerpts from a significant address given by the Honorable George W. Ball, Under Secretary of State, Jan. 30, 1966.)