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Pike: War, Peace and the Viet Cong

A PERSONAL PREFACE

Vietnam defies simplification. At the vortex, Saigon, the complexity is greatest, the view most personal. Even after eight years one cannot leave Vietnam with any Great Truth Concluded unless one is simple-minded or the servant of some interest other than truth (we've had more than our share of both). I flew out of Saigon dozens of times during the war and always, at take-off, with the same thoughts:

¶ That in my latest stay I'd had no increment of wisdom, that at best I had managed to maintain a cool objective view, suspecting all the time that objectivity may reflect, not sagacity, only uncertainty.

¶ That once again I was leaving behind a place of pluses and minuses, of goods and bads (all, I cheerfully admit, measured by my own yardstick), of paradoxes and imponderables, leaving again with the tinge of sadness that comes in moments of reflection on the plight of the Vietnamese people, on one's own sins of omission, on the passage of time.

¶ That beyond a few facts about Vietnam that I cart around like an attaché case, all else hangs in a smog of relativity. One concludes that to leave heartened or sympathetic or revengeful or full of despair depends only slightly on where you were, for how long, or what you experienced

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in Vietnam; it indicates only baggage that you brought with you:

Who was that early sodbuster in Kansas? He leaned at the gatepost and studied the horizon and figured what corn might do next year and tried to calculate why God ever made the grasshopper and why two days of hot winds smother the life out of a stand of wheat and why there was such a spread between what he got for grain and the price quoted in Chicago and New York. Drove up a newcomer in a covered wagon: "What kind of folks live around here?" "Well, stranger, what kind of folks was there in the country you come from?" "Well, they was mostly a low-down, lying, thieving, gossiping, backbiting lot of people." "Well, I guess, stranger, that's about the kind of folks you'll find around here." And the dusty gray stranger had just about blended into the dusty gray cottonwoods in a clump on the horizon when another newcomer drove up: "What kind of folks live around here?" "Well, stranger, what kind of folks was there in the country you come from?" "Well, they was mostly a decent, hardworking, lawabiding, friendly lot of people." "Well, I guess, stranger, that's about the kind of folks you'll find around here." And the second wagon moved off and blended with the dusty gray cottonwoods on the horizon while the early sodbuster leaned at his gatepost and tried to figure why two days of hot winds smother the life out of a nice stand of wheat.¹

Raw opinion on Vietnam is cheap and largely worthless. Even straight facts are of limited value. Of course, to understand Vietnam it is necessary to collect data, but the fumbling comes in isolating important fact from the welter of trivia, in distilling the data into meaning. The materials consist of past and present events, our opinion of them, the ideal of what might be. The task of those of us who write about Vietnam is to relate the reality of the war to the logic of our experience. Herein lies the gulf. Vietnam has become

¹ Carl Sandburg, *The People, Yes* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936).

the great intellectual tragedy of our times. Why this is so I do not understand. Living in Vietnam for eight years has contributed nothing to my enlightenment. The story of Vietnam has not been told, not even its beginnings. Perhaps it must be told from somewhere else. Perhaps nonfiction is the wrong medium. My greatest despair is that the story may never be told the way it was. Even as I write, I must admit that my strongest feeling toward Vietnam remains puzzlement. Such, perhaps, is the truth for all of us. In the past two years I have traveled 150,000 miles, talking to people in 47 countries about Vietnam. Most, I find, frankly don't care much about Vietnam; they come to hear me out of curiosity, remain to ask questions out of courtesy. I have never encountered a single truly hostile audience. The predominant reaction of the overwhelming majority of those to whom I've talked has been genuine confusion; they are puzzled about why the war goes on for so long, what America is doing there, why nothing moves as common sense would dictate. This view was exquisitely condensed by a question from an Indian in Calcutta (who obviously had been influenced by American English) who rose and with great dignity asked, not flippantly or provocatively, but in the intensely serious manner that the Bengali can best muster: "Sir, what's with Vietnam?"

That, I felt, was the ultimate question. What's with Vietnam? Now that we have the question, I thought, if only we had the ultimate answer.

This volume deals with Vietnam and its transition from the strife of war to the strife of peace. It focuses chiefly on the strategy, the interests, and the objectives of those whom the world calls the Viet Cong. Chapter One lists the contenders in the struggle and describes their basic objectives.

Chapter Two deals with context, the social and political milieu in which the struggle is being fought. Then, in Chapter Three, I attempt to suggest the alternate directions events in Vietnam may take. Chapter Four, the heart of this book, is concerned with the major strategic options open. Finally, Chapter Five adds some summary comments on short-term prospects and long-term possibilities. The touchstone throughout is rational strategy and doctrine. The primary orientation is that it is best to view Vietnam not as a war that requires victory but as a problem that requires solution.

This book is intended for those who are seriously interested in the Vietnam struggle. It is not a recapitulation of recent events in Vietnam and, in fact, deliberately seeks not to duplicate basic reporting of recent years. Rather it is an attempt to provide a factual background for understanding Vietnam at the moment and for events following in the next few years as peace gradually returns. The focus is on objectives and strategies of contending forces, and therefore, the author hopes, the book will remain useful regardless of the zigzag of specific events in Vietnam.

A word on sources. Most of the ideas and data contained here come from the rather candid published statements by the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front leaders; these have been more valuable than all other sources combined. The second most important source has been the tons of documents picked up by American and Vietnamese troops on the battlefield in the course of military operations; several thousand of the most important of these, including ones used in this book, have been microfilmed and catalogued and are available through the Center for International Studies at M.I.T. and the Southeast Asia Program at Cornell University (unfortunately for interested Americans, most are without English translations).

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I am a United States Foreign Service Officer making a career in the United States Information Agency. This book was written privately, on my own time. Any views expressed here are mine and should not be interpreted as reflecting the views of the U.S. Government. This does not mean, I should hope, that they are not shared by many of my colleagues within the government.

It is beyond the ken of any man to see down the road into Vietnam's future beyond a few weeks. Beware of those who claim to be able to do so. Because we cannot see ahead, we tend to despair that the war will never end. This sense of endlessness in wartime is neither new nor unique. I was in New Guinea in 1944 and remember hearing of a "hundred-year war" against Japan seriously predicted and convincingly argued. In Seoul in 1952 I recall a dinner at which a French general maintained that the Korean war had to go on indefinitely because "it couldn't logically end." That we cannot see the end to a war is not the same as that there is no end. Wars do end, thank God, and often sooner than we have a right to expect.

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