

PERSPECTIVE ON VIETNAM

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EMERGENCY COMMITTEE FOR A FREE VIETNAM

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Why should you read something more on Vietnam? For over a decade, the front pages and evening news were dominated by that nightmare. You were saturated with the Vietnam story: the big quagmire, the rot and corruption, the napalm, the devastation, the misery and death. Every day you read about disgrace and disaster.

But was that the whole story? Was it the real story? Was it really an American nightmare, an American disaster and disgrace?

Stop and think. Those who said it was a disaster and disgrace also said that resistance to the Communists would collapse just as soon as US troops pulled out, didn't they? Yet two years later, resistance hasn't collapsed. Could it be that something was missing from all that reporting and analysis you read on Vietnam?

This brochure tries to give you some of the missing pieces and missing perspective. It summarizes briefly the broad picture and basic answers on Vietnam. It gives the positive side, and also the real negative side, the real mistakes that went largely unreported. We ask you to read this brochure, and then judge for yourself whether America really deserves a Failure and Guilt Complex over Vietnam.

DID WE DESTROY VIETNAM?

- On the contrary, we have helped the Government of Vietnam to:
- Transform the peasantry from subsistence sharecroppers to sophisticated small landowners, who can now feed a large new urban population and even export food;
 - Accelerate industrialization, with a wide variety of factories growing at the rate of 8 to 15 percent each year, and producing an almost complete range of consumer goods for Vietnam;
 - Redistribute income downward, with greatly increased mass consumption of small consumer goods during the war years, few more cars but vastly more motorbikes, sewing machines, transistor radios, and the like;

- Revolutionize health care, with many new hospitals and hundreds of new clinics, probably saving more lives than were lost in the war;
- Train skills in depth, hundreds of thousands of new skilled workers, perhaps the fastest development of human resources on record for an underdeveloped country anywhere in the world;
- Launch a cultural explosion, a renaissance of Vietnamese culture, with mass readership and more new book titles than many larger countries;
- Encourage effective trade unions, free to organize and strike, with effective bargaining power;
- Encourage a lively press, with 20 dailies (only three of them pro-government) and numerous weeklies, all adept at dodging wartime censorship, *while few other Afro-Asian countries tolerate any opposition press*;
- Tolerate a lively political opposition which has controlled the Senate and several provincial assemblies. The Vietnamese thus have a choice of candidates on the ballot and a choice of viewpoints in newspapers, something available in only a few Afro-Asian countries. *Note that the Vietnamese today enjoy a greater degree of democracy than most members of the United Nations, not to mention the night-and-day contrast with North Vietnam and other Communist countries.*

WAS THE US ROLE MORALLY JUSTIFIABLE?

- *Wasn't Ho Chi Minh the true patriotic leader?* The Communists were newcomers to Vietnam's long struggle for independence. They slaughtered the true patriotic leaders who had fought the French for decades.
- *Didn't the US scuttle the post-1954 reunification election?* Such an election would have been a farce, since all of Vietnam (North and South) was under dictatorial rule after 1954.
- *Didn't we intervene in a purely civil war?* North Vietnam, a country very foreign to South Vietnam, started the war by sending down thousands of terrorists to assassinate local officials. This was outside aggression, like the terrorist attacks in Israel.
- *What had the US to gain from all this?* The Communists have showed a taste for peaceful coexistence only after they learned that we were not Paper Tigers, and that military expansion could get nowhere.

BUT WAS THAT WAR EVER WINNABLE IN THE FIRST PLACE?

The 1950s saw two good precedents for success in Vietnam—Malaysia and the Philippines. But it was many years before we began to apply the lessons of those countries. At first we made many mistakes in Vietnam, most of them later rectified.

THE REAL ERRORS, largely ignored by reporters and analysts, were:

- *Neglect of the paramilitary*—Experience in Malaysia in particular taught that the key to winning a counterinsurgency was ample on-the-spot militia in each hamlet. . . In Vietnam, the actual fire-power assigned per hamlet was less than in Malaysia until late 1968.
- *Insufficient ARVN mobility*—Vietnamese Army units were demoralized by walking into ambush after ambush, until they got the kind of helicopter support provided to US combat units. . . In other respects, their equipment was inadequate until late 1968.
- *Combat indiscipline*—Nonfighting Vietnamese officers got choice reassignments. . . The Republic of Vietnam never called a full mobilization before 1968.
- *Stalled reforms*—We did not even offer projects to push land reform, corruption control, or to strengthen local administration until late 1968.

THE UNDERLYING CAUSES of these errors were US policies such as:

- *The Blank Check*—The Keep-All-Options-Open policy, which said to the Vietnamese, "Get out and fight, because if you don't, we will do it for you."
- *Small-Increment Planning*—The Graduated Response approach, trying a little more of this and a little more of that, but never looking at the total requirements of the whole job.
- *Overreliance on heavy munitions tonnage*—Heavy artillery and bombing as substitutes for Vietnamese discipline and performance.
- *Disjointed staff organization*—While many individuals in the US Mission in Vietnam saw the need for discipline, resources, and reforms, there was no institutional structure for applying the necessary planning and leverage to get results.

THE RECTIFICATION OF MOST OF THE ERRORS finally came with:

- *The end of the Blank Check*—The Tet Offensive and the New Hampshire Primary in early 1968 showed the Vietnamese that they

could no longer rely on unlimited US support. . . They then stiffened their discipline and voted a full mobilization. . . *Note that Doves in the US thus played a major role in turning around the war.*

- **Expansion and support of the paramilitary**—After full mobilization was declared, the militia forces assigned to guard hamlets were considerably expanded and reequipped. . . The hamlets finally got enough defensive firepower to stop VC attacks.
- **Reorganization of the US Mission in Vietnam**—bringing the total pacification effort into a sufficiently tight structure to work the needed changes.
- **Land reform**—The Republic of Vietnam removed the main issue the Communists had exploited by carrying out one of the most rigorous and successful land redistributions ever attempted in any country, thus giving every peasant a solid stake in the system. . . By contrast, the peasants of North Vietnam work as sharecroppers for the State.
- **Administrative reforms**—Eliminating much of the petty extortion that is typical of Afro-Asian countries, though by no means eliminating all the typical corruption of an underdeveloped country.
- **Revitalization of the Village**—Reestablishment of the traditional cohesive village community, giving it a measure of administrative, fiscal, and even military autonomy, plus ample financial resources and public services. . . *Note that the militia and armed citizens generally fight well because they are fighting for their own village, not for the government in Saigon.*

Thus in late 1968, the tide of war changed, as the village regimes loyal to the Republic of Vietnam took over in village after village. . . It was a victory for which hawks and doves alike can claim credit.

BUT HAS ALL THIS REALLY DONE ANY GOOD?

- Statistics show that pacification was over 90 percent successful.
- That is, over 90 percent of the population was brought under firm government control, alienated from the VC.
- But one can always quibble with statistics and reports.
- Instead, there are *four concrete indicators of success*:
 - **Mass distribution of weapons**—Weapons have been turned over to over a million part-time members of the People's Self-Defense Force, in over 10,000 hamlets. . . Before the turning point of the war, most of these weapons might soon have been in VC hands.

- **Vietnamization**—All US troops are out, and the military situation was actually better after the cease-fire than it had been when US combat strength was at its peak. . . This must indicate a radical improvement in Vietnamese Army and militia fighting, as well as much greater popular support.
- **Disappearance of local VC**—More and more of the so-called VC units have been made up largely of North Vietnamese.
- **Hanoi's temporary abandonment of insurgency**—In 1972, Hanoi switched completely from guerrilla tactics to blitzkrieg, panzar attacks and all. . . This was stopped in spite of the departure of US combat forces. Now in 1975, the Communists have again reverted to full-scale conventional attacks against the South.

WHAT IS THE SITUATION NOW?

- **Agriculture is the bright spot.**
 - Food self-sufficiency in spite of departure of much rural labor for the Army or the city . . . thanks to new technology.
 - Over 30 percent of the farmers getting comprehensive agricultural credit . . . Compare to 5-10 percent in most developing countries.
 - Over 50 percent of farmers using modern seed and fertilizer . . . Compare to 10-20 percent in most developing countries.
 - Farmers not under VC control are prospering.
- **The urban economy is hard hit.**
 - 200,000-300,000 left unemployed by the departure of US forces.
 - Severe devaluations drastically lowered urban real incomes.
 - Everyone in town is eating, but few are buying factory goods.
 - So many factories are half-idle.
 - Nevertheless, some new factories are going up.
 - Inflation is down to the European level, and the balance of payments is coming into equilibrium.
 - A few foreign investors are beginning to put up factories to export canned food and consumer goods, *taking advantage of Vietnam's exceptional reservoir of well-trained labor, available at wages competitive with any Asian country.*
- **Politics have had ups and downs since the cease-fire.**
 - Local democracy was repressed after the cease-fire, but has now been revived. . . The opposition controls several local assemblies.
 - The opposition held control of the Senate till recent elections.

- The opposition still acts as a check on Thieu, recently forcing him to fire several ministers.
- Vietnam has maintained a degree of democracy higher than most members of the UN, in spite of severe economic difficulties and in spite of an invading army on its soil.
- **The military outlook was good until Congress slashed the aid budget.**
 - Vietnamese units were fighting well on 20 percent of the fuel and ammunition normally provided to US units in combat.
 - The Congress slashed the budget for fuel and ammunition so drastically that much of the country can no longer be defended.
 - As a result, the Communists (largely foreign) have steadily expanded their control in recent months.

**GENERAL PROSPECTS ARE GOOD,
IF MILITARY SUPPLIES ARE ADEQUATE**

- The Vietnamese Army and armed citizens can maintain security *if* they can get the necessary supplies from us—and they only need 20 percent of the fuel and ammunition provided US units in combat.
- With a modest increase in development aid, Vietnam can expand its food exports.
- With foreign investment, Vietnam can produce factory goods for export at highly competitive prices.
- *Substantial offshore oil is a probability*, though not certain.
- Vietnam can be economically on its own in another five years.

**YES, BUT WHAT'S THE TOTAL BILL?
I THOUGHT WE WERE OUT OF THERE.**

- The bill to date is over \$100 billion, *plus 56,000 American lives*.
- Roughly another \$6 billion is needed, spread over five years.
- Say, \$1.8 billion this year, \$1.5 billion next year, and so on.
- *For another 6 percent, America can preserve its record of never losing a war.*
- There is no obligation—and no need—to send US troops back to Vietnam. The Vietnamese can do the job themselves.
- It is no accident that Hanoi is again demanding the end of *all* US assistance—and the overthrow of the Thieu government. They know they cannot win if we continue to help the South.

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM ALL THIS, from a more balanced and realistic look at our Vietnam experience? Basically, that Vietnam has not been a defeat and a disgrace. For another 6 percent of the total

cost, and with no more loss of life, America can keep its military credibility and its honor intact.

We need not wallow in guilt and despair over our role. The war was ugly and brutal, as all wars are. We paid too high a price, as we have in almost all wars. At times, we did more killing than was necessary; at times, we did less.

But we did not destroy a country, as was often alleged. In spite of the war, Vietnam is still a far more healthy, egalitarian, and politically vibrant society than before America's role there.

FINALLY, LET US CONSIDER THE BASIC PARADOX OF AMERICA'S SECURITY. The most successful weapons are those which are never used. The most successful wars may be those that seem the most futile, that seem to be an overresponse to a limited threat. Below is a parable which illustrates this basic paradox:

A Parable: The Rhineland War, 1936-1941

In 1936, Hitler moved his divisions into the demilitarized Rhineland and France struck back. With assurances of support from Britain and the US, the French government ordered a partial mobilization and issued a declaration of war. The British government immediately dispatched a small expeditionary force. FDR secured a broadly-worded resolution from an almost-unanimous Congress. A high-level US mission was dispatched to Paris to arrange assistance to the Allied cause.

Both sides were caught by surprise by the sequence of events; neither side was really prepared for a major war. A new generation of military weapons such as specialized bombers and fighters was still in development. Both sides managed to bomb a few targets some 200 miles inside each other's territory. Both sides managed to launch attacks some dozens of miles across the frontiers. But the war rapidly bogged down.

The Wehrmacht, facing Allies with potential overwhelming superiority, distinguished itself with brilliant generalship and spectacularly courageous soldiery. The Nazis solidified the home front in a fight for survival. Concentration camps were emptied. All Jews were rounded up and transported in boxcars to the Polish frontier. This initially caused some protest abroad, but most world opinion gradually sympathized with Nazi measures of self-defense. After a few months, the Wehrmacht gained the initiative. It penetrated deeper and deeper into French territory.

In the US, the war effort generated widespread enthusiasm. The last vestiges of the Great Depression disappeared, as industry mobilized for war production and young men flocked to join the armed forces. FDR won a landslide reelection. Initially, only war materiel and logistic support forces were dispatched to the Western Front. After a German attack inflicted severe damage on several US logistic support bases, however, FDR began dispatching units. As the war dragged on, US combat forces gradually increased. Eventually the US Expeditionary Force numbered over 500,000 men. In late 1938, Congress voted a draft.

The French performed poorly. A succession of weak coalition governments never had the political strength to call a full mobilization or reform the archaic leadership of the French Army. Corruption and a series of spectacular scandals further weakened the French war effort. French army morale plummeted. The French combat effort grew more and more undisciplined and lethargic. The British war effort, although more disciplined, was also somewhat restrained. US forces took on more and more of the combat burden.

Gradually the tide of war did turn. The US Air Force took command of the air. The Germans continued to hold some salients across the Rhine, but an offensive spearheaded by US armor pushed deep into German territory. Allied air power began saturation bombing of cities.

The Germans fought like lions for their homeland. Their courage and determination began to evoke widespread sympathy. Vivid pictures in the daily papers of the suffering German civilian population provoked widespread outrage. Protesters marched in the capitals of the Western world. Ministers denounced the barbaric bombing of defenseless civilians. The Massachusetts legislature passed a resolution denouncing the dispatch of draftees abroad in an undeclared war as unconstitutional.

A few continued to argue the falling domino theory. They quoted passages from Nazi documents which could be construed to imply intentions of world conquest and extermination of certain races. They argued that if Hitler were not stopped at the Rhineland in 1936, in a few years he would have been marching into Austria or the Sudetenland or some other German irredenta and engulfing all Europe in war. By 1940, this viewpoint was thoroughly discredited.

In 1941, a new US President took office pledged to end "this totally senseless war."

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