

STRENGTHENING SOUTH VIET-NAM POLITICALLY

1. Summary of the Present Situation

Regardless of the new phase in the Paris negotiations, the key to attaining a lasting solution in Viet-Nam remains the development of a cohesive Nationalist political force in the South, which is capable of competing politically as well as militarily with the Viet Cong. Whether the development of such a political force is still possible, with the Viet Cong now elevated to co-equal status on the world scene and with the growing lack of faith in the American commitment on the part of most Vietnamese, is a serious question. We will have to provide more sensitive support for Vietnamese political development than we have in the past, and we will have to hold firm against any form of coalition government, if there is to be sufficient stability and faith in the future in South Viet-Nam to make further political development possible.

Despite a lack of understanding American support for Vietnamese political development, a framework has nevertheless been established. It consists of the new Vietnamese Constitution and its institutions - the Presidency, the National Assembly, the Courts and the Village and City Councils. On the other hand, other ingredients needed to make the Constitution work, such as viable political organizations, a sense of political unity and inspiring leadership, are still missing.

The Tet offensive by the Communists, the looming possibility of eventual American withdrawal and the bombing halt have stimulated a new sense of realism among South Vietnamese politicians. Essentially, however, the

present system of Government in Viet-Nam is still too corrupt, too distant from its people and too unresponsive to represent a positive cause worth fighting for. Survival and protection of family, village, religious or ethnic group remains the primary motive for fighting.

At the same time, there are able patriotic Vietnamese in the Army, in the Government, in the National Assembly, in the various religious and ethnic groups, and in some of the political parties and the labor unions who could help pull the country together. To encourage the emergence of this leadership in harmony with a cautious and suspicious, but essentially well motivated, President will be difficult. Political assets also exist in the form of real grass roots organizations among the religious and ethnic groups and among a few of the political parties. With encouragement from the top, these organizations could work together, and with the Vietnamese Government, in better harmony.

While the Americans could play a constructive role in encouraging political development, they have not done this well in the past. Unless the U.S. Mission is reorganized and staffed with individuals with rare sensitivity, the best that can probably be expected, in terms of American help for this process, would be broad support to shore up the constitution framework and to encourage a coalition of nationalist political forces in preparation for the coming political confrontation with the Communists. While we have no right to impose our ideas, we do have the right to insist that the Vietnamese leadership lives up, in its actions, to the principles and ideals expressed in the Vietnamese Constitution. At the same time,

the U.S. must remain firm in its ultimate commitment to Vietnamese freedom, if widespread despair and even panic is to be prevented.

There is also a significant role of assistance to be played in South Vietnamese political development by Americans from organizations other than the U.S. Administration. Specifically, the U.S. Congress and our major political parties could effectively assist their Vietnamese counterparts through a series of exchange visits, as could American labor unions, legal societies, journalistic societies and other groups. The enabling legislation for this exists under Title IX to the Foreign Assistance Act of 1967 and previous legislation. What is needed from the U.S. Government is the concept and leadership to mobilize such an effort and to meld it effectively with the Vietnamese.

It would also be helpful to Vietnamese political development if the U.S. were to cut down on the multiplicity of agencies and advisors in AID, CIA, JUSPAO, the Embassy and MACV which impinge on Vietnamese political sovereignty. In some areas, particularly that of economic aid, they could be replaced by a less top-heavy and more efficient joint commission concept, similar to the JCRR on Taiwan.

2. The Objectives

The main objective of political development in South Viet-Nam, and American support for this development, must be to prepare the Vietnamese Nationalists for political confrontation with the Communists. The effort to attain this objective may be divided into two major lines of endeavor,

to make the present constitution work so that it becomes a viable framework within which a political confrontation can be carried out; and to develop a truly grass roots, nationalist political organization.

Particular stress should be placed on the preservation and strengthening of the present Constitution because it represents the genesis of a common cause for the Vietnamese nationalists. The more its principles can be put into action, the more it will embody what the Vietnamese want, which is essentially democracy. Moreover, without the Constitution, South Viet-Nam would again slip back into political chaos. For this reason the Constitution must be preserved in any future political confrontation with the Communists, as difficult as it will be to get them to accept, for example, participating in Lower House elections as a first step in a political accommodation.

We should also keep in mind that political development in South Viet-Nam must be tied in with our negotiating position with the North Vietnamese, and the Viet Cong, in any peace negotiations. This bargaining position must be based on a realistic assessment of what can and cannot be conceded in any political settlement, if the eventual political confrontation is to be at least an even contest.

3. Actions to Strengthen South Viet-Nam Politically

The key to success in strengthening the Vietnamese Nationalists for their political confrontation with the Communists lies in getting them to take actions based essentially on their ideas and plans, not on American

ideas. We can encourage them and in some cases pressure them, and we can help create the right climate for positive changes and reform; but we cannot take these actions ourselves.

The first thing that needs to be done is for the U. S. to convince the Vietnamese that we still have faith in them, and that our agreement to permit the NLF to come to Paris, is not a disguised surrender, or an inevitable step towards coalition government. If we can succeed in doing that, the next step will be to get the Vietnamese leadership out in contact with lower echelon officials and officers reassuring these leaders, who are in direct contact with the people, that the struggle must and will go on. Otherwise, what exists in the way of a spirit of sacrifice and will to resist is likely to ooze away at the local level where it counts the most.

We cannot rely on President Thieu alone for this kind of leadership because he does not yet possess a sufficiently wide base of support. It will require the participation of other leaders with regional followings such as General Minh in the south, General Thi in the center and a number of religious and political leaders.

At the same time, we must give reassurance to the Vietnamese in such a way that it acts as a stimulant to their sense of urgency and self-reliance. This is difficult to do without overpandering to Vietnamese weaknesses on the one hand, or appearing as untrustworthy, bullying, commitment welchers on the other. A gradual American withdrawal which creates self-confidence, rather than panic, must be carefully

orchestrated from both Saigon and Washington with a regard for Vietnamese sensitivities which we have not yet demonstrated. The handling of the bombing halt is a particular case in point.

Unless we learn how better to handle our relations with the Vietnamese and stimulate the political development needed to face up to the Viet Cong, we seem almost certain to lose the coming phase of the continuing Viet-Nam struggle.

In addition to shoring up morale, there are a number of other actions, which are within the capabilities of the leaders of South Vietnam, which would measurably strengthen their government, and which would help to coalesce nationalist political forces into a more unified and determined whole. These actions may be, and in most cases should be, lead by President Thieu but their success will depend on the participation of many others in what is essentially a diffused and confused power structure.

Among those actions which should receive consideration in the political strengthening of South Viet-Nam are the following: