

THE VIETNAM PROBLEM

INTRODUCTION

This paper is conceived and presented with the conviction that the ultimate solution to the Viet-Nam war lies mainly on-the-ground in Viet-Nam and that it is primarily political in nature. The outcome of the conflict, therefore, is dependent ultimately on the will of the Vietnamese people, and on whether, with our assistance, they will be able to create an effective government which merits the support of its people.

As a Government, we have tended to believe in the omnipotence of our vast array of material power, and that somehow the development of this power would bring a satisfactory solution. We have shown little understanding of the nature of the Vietnamese people, of the nature of our enemy and his strategy, or of the nature of the conflict itself. Further, in arraying our power and using it we have tended to displace the Vietnamese and their efforts on their own behalf, the most essential elements in a satisfactory outcome.

It is now tragically late. Four power negotiations are practically underway; but our Vietnamese allies do not possess the unified political base necessary to sustain such negotiations or to achieve a satisfactory political resolution of the conflict. Yet, we believe it is not too late, because there are still enough Vietnamese patriots to carry on the political struggle, or to go on with the war if necessary, if we can only begin to give them firm support and effective help.

Having brought the negotiations along in such a way as to permit the NLF to emerge as the defacto equal of the Saigon Government, we now have a most serious problem of morale and mutual trust with our Vietnamese allies.

It will take a very special effort on our part, not merely to reassure them that we will not cram a coalition government down their throats, but to get them to reassure their own people in such a way as to achieve the unity and resolution needed to win the political struggle. We must recognize that this will depend not only on Vietnamese efforts, but also on the credibility of the American commitment, which is now in serious doubt among the Vietnamese.

This paper examines where we are now, and to a necessary extent what has gone wrong and why. More importantly it presents the thesis that it is still possible to salvage a satisfactory solution, a form of ultimate political victory, in Viet-Nam if we really bend ourselves to the task. This will mean some painful restructuring of the U.S. Government to prosecute our Viet-Nam effort; and it will mean being painfully honest with the American people about what we are really up against and why we must persevere. Finally, it will mean some very tough decisions for the new President.

The modest purpose of this paper is to help point the way towards those decisions which have to be made.

U.S. OBJECTIVES

Since 1965 the primary U.S. objective in Viet-Nam has been to prevent the defeat of South Viet-Nam by Communist forces, whether North Vietnamese or Viet Cong. This automatically involves a number of concurrent objectives -- such as the U.S. goals of stability in Southeast Asia, of an independent, non-Communist government in South Viet-Nam, of social and economic wellbeing for the South Vietnamese people, of military self-sufficiency for the South Vietnamese armed forces. We may speak of one objective; in fact we pursue several related and inseparable goals.

For example, Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy summarized the U.S. objective as "solely that of protecting the independence of South Viet-Nam

from external interference and force." Then, explaining why we held that objective he said: "... Southeast Asia does matter ... the independence of South Viet-Nam crucially affects Southeast Asia and ... non-communist nationalism in Southeast Asia and in Viet-Nam has in it the seeds of a peaceful, progressive and stable area that can take its place in a world at peace."

Today, other official statements and on-going programs in Viet-Nam support the following three objectives:

- Assist South Viet-Nam provide its own internal security and increase its capability to deter and defend against external aggression;
- Help South Viet-Nam secure sufficient time and means to develop an effective, broadly based and cohesive nationalist force capable of meeting the needs of the South Vietnamese people and of competing politically with indigenous Communist elements;
- Seek an honorable settlement which respects international borders, ends the fighting and permits further development of representative political institutions -- thus permitting the reduction and eventual withdrawal of U.S. forces without jeopardizing the primary U.S. objectives in Viet-Nam.

To these must be added a fourth objective found in the Republic and Democratic Party platforms and in statements by official and non-official spokesmen: - de-Americanize the war.

- This fourth objective is consistent with the goals of security, political development and peace listed above.
- It is not consistent with the strategy we have been following in pursuit with those goals.
- It indicates that in the near future priority U.S. objectives are probably
 - Withdraw U.S. troops as soon as possible
 - Help the Vietnamese create conditions which give South Vietnamese nationalists a fighting chance - militarily and politically.