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Mr. Frederick E. Nolting, U. S. Ambassador to
Vietnam

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Bombs, Rockets, Shells, Popular Support and the U. S. Interest

1. Before you depart, I would like to take the opportunity to present for your consideration a problem which has been of the gravest concern to me and a number of other Americans here for some time. I, like others, have hesitated to speak out on this subject until I felt I had obtained sufficient first-hand experience to properly weigh and judge the pertinent factors involved. What I have to say represents not only my own opinion but the opinions of many military officers including some who are currently engaged in bombing Vietnamese and Montagnard villages.

2. It seems now to be axiomatic that to win a counterinsurgency the government must win the support of the governed, i. e., the civilian population. At least, that is what almost everyone seems to say. More, it is absolutely true, if there can be any absolute truth derived from the experience of nominally democratic countries which have fought, and won or lost, such wars. So long as actions taken in the course of such wars contribute to winning the people, they contribute to winning the war. When they do not contribute to winning the people, they contribute to losing the war.

3. There is another point of view, less widely expressed, but perhaps more widely held and practiced in Vietnam today than is generally realized. In that view those who do not support the government, or who are not in government controlled areas, must suffer for this - (after all, war is hell) and after suffering long enough they will either blame the VC for their suffering, or will come over to government controlled areas to escape the bombs, shells, etc., which are their lot when the VC are around. There is a certain validity in this view-point, and not a few present residents of strategic hamlets have moved into them to escape being treated as enemy.

4. However, I have had at least two ARVN generals, three colonels, many province chiefs, and a number of American advisors, especially at the provincial level, tell me that they feel that the bombing, shelling, or strafing of villages is counter-productive, no matter how many VC are killed. Their view, which many can back up from daily contact with the population which has been so treated, is that the practice of attacking

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GROUP 1
Downgraded at 3 years from original
Declassified after 10 years

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villages invariably generates more recruits than casualties for the VC. In some areas our provincial representatives are now helping in attempts to make strategic hamlets out of villages which have been attacked by air or artillery "because they contained VC." They are finding the task extremely difficult, needless to say, and feel that most often the strategic hamlets so created are Strategic Hamlets of the VC.

5. These are not isolated instances. Time after time villages have been and are being attacked by air and artillery before ground assault, without any thought of an immediate follow-up by ground forces, simply because there are believed to be and may well be VC in the village. It is true that air strikes against inhabited places are supposed to be controlled by ground observers, or at least approved on the basis of ground reconnaissance, but many air strikes are not so controlled and in any case this is meaningless to the women and children killed or made homeless. It is also true that US planes and pilots are in the main striking only targets which have been pinpointed by Vietnamese L-19 pilots dropping smoke pots, but this is a symbolic act resembling the hand-washing ceremony of Roman governors. The facts are that the Vietnamese request air strikes against hamlets and get them on the basis of their intelligence which is more often than not many hours if not days old.

6. There are three excellent reasons why we should refuse to countenance or support such actions. Two are matters of policy for they are not only basic principles of counterinsurgency, but are also basic principles of the United States. These are:

a. No one should be punished for actions beyond his control or forced on him by fear for his life. In Vietnam today this means that the villagers who have VC among them must be presumed to be acting under compulsion. To presume otherwise is to besmirch the image which the GVN and ourselves seek to create of the government as the friend and protector of the governed.

b. Excessive punishment creates hatred. When any punishment is possibly unjust, as well as excessive, it is certain to create hatred for those who inflict it. Today this hatred is directed at the GVN and makes permanent pacification difficult if not impossible, but the VC are assiduously trying to direct it also against the US. When the insurgency is over, can one doubt that this hate-America campaign will continue, and will, in fact be supported by many non-VC who today are silent, or are encouraging these acts, simply as a way to shift the blame?

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7. The third reason is military, and perhaps more open to question, but nevertheless worth mentioning. It is that the availability of air and artillery weapons still further reduces the already limited willingness of Vietnamese ground forces to close with and defeat the enemy in "violent assault" on the ground, the only truly sure method of annihilating him or inducing him to surrender.

8. What can, and should, the US do about this? First, and this I regard as essential for the protection of our own consciences and reputation, we should absolutely prohibit any attacks by US aircraft or US pilots, on any targets where the absence of women and children cannot be positively determined. This means, in effect, inhibiting them from any attacks on houses or villages. This prohibition should be given the widest publicity, and any violation of it severely punished.

9. Improving the practices of the Vietnamese is more difficult. The least we can do, indeed the least we dare to do in our own interest, is publicly to announce our opposition to air attacks against inhabited areas, and to artillery attacks, either against such areas or not controlled by ground observation. It would probably be desirable to extend this policy to restricting the use of air and artillery to observed fire in defense against actual attacks. If necessary to secure observance of these restrictions, deliveries of US supplied aerial and artillery munitions could be suspended.

10. The practice of declaring certain areas "Free Zones" in which anything that moves may be attacked with aerial munitions dumped on targets or at random, and artillery "harassing" fire conducted unobserved, should also be discontinued or discouraged. Some Vietnamese, such as General Cao, are actively considering this practice as the solution to the Delta problem. Vast areas are seemingly to be depopulated and made "Free Zones," with the people herded into hamlets along the roads. This, of course, violates the basic concept of government for the people and of building a popular base for the government. It is a psychologically and, many believe, militarily unsound counterinsurgency practice. Certainly it is not one which the US can afford to support.

11. Restricting the employment of US personnel and planes, and seeking to restrict air and artillery actions of the Vietnamese, will meet only part of the requirement. The same principles must be extended throughout

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our advisory effort. Recently, according to apparently reliable reports, 70 or more Bahnar villages were burned and all livestock destroyed, in a single operation by a single ARVN regiment. I am told that the US advisor protested, but I cannot find that his protest has been made a matter of record. Perhaps that was correct, in this instance, but any repetition of such actions should be made the subject of strong protest at the highest level. We simply cannot afford to permit such actions by troops of a nation to which we are so heavily committed. Not only do they impair the counterinsurgency effort, but, and this is much more important, they provide a potent psychological weapon which can and will be used against the US, and the policies of the US, by our declared enemies, by neutrals, and by our friends, indeed by many of our own people.

12. This war is not an isolated phenomenon. It is an episode in a continuing world-wide psychological and military struggle for the survival of the United States. The actions which we take, or support, here in Vietnam, must be viewed in that context, and as they may be made to appear long after our major involvement here has ended.

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