

Thoughts on Vietnam

I.

The United States needs a win in Vietnam. This need is clearly a critical matter, if one considers not only the consequences of our commitment there, but also how much the events in Vietnam are reflected in U.S. relations in country after country around the world. Anything less than a plainly recognized win will pose foreign problems for the United States, ranging from the difficult to the dangerous. The moment seems to be one of those potential turning points in world history which usually look like just another event until they are seen truly afterwards. It is now just before us.

A win is possible in Vietnam. It will require the United States to mend its ways in dealing with Vietnamese problems and to use intelligently the lessons taught by the war in Vietnam, not merely pay them lip-service. The changes required are practical ones. If they are undertaken correctly, the United States can start the Vietnamese on the first steps towards victory. If they are followed up thoroughly, there will be a definite win during the new U.S. Administration, a win credited to the leadership of President Johnson.

The principles involved in gaining a win in Vietnam are fundamental ones. They can be stated this way:

- a. The Vietnamese themselves are the only ones who can truly free their own country from Communist subversive insurgents who are striving to capture the country by capturing the loyalty of its people.
- b. The United States, which is committed to help the Vietnamese be free, must give its help in a way that strengthens the Vietnamese will and capability to achieve freedom; conversely, it must not give help in a way to encourage some selected Vietnamese to wage conventional war on their own people; the "freedom" of the grave is not the desired end.

c. Thus, the United States must place Americans into Vietnam, in positions where their influence can be decisive, whom the Vietnamese trust to share the Vietnamese desire to be free in a way understood by Vietnamese, and whom the Vietnamese realists believe can give practical advice worthy of their heeding on how to defeat Communist subversive insurgency as it is waged in Asia; this is another way of saying: pick the right man for the job, position him to do the job, and then give him the help he needs to get the job done.

d. With the right Americans in the right places doing the right things in Vietnam, the climate will be established for the right Vietnamese to emerge into the right places to do the right things to free their country; the "right things" include both a strategy which out-thinks and out-does the Communist leadership and a strategy which constructs a stable government reflecting and responsive to the will of the great majority of the people in a way they recognize and willingly support.

II.

These fundamental principles, in turn, need to be put into practice in a realistic way. Noted below are some of the initial steps in doing so:

1) The top U.S. leadership in Vietnam, starting with the Ambassador, should be Americans who are associated in Vietnamese minds as champions of individual liberty and who have proven this championship out on the battlegrounds of today's struggle. In Vietnamese eyes, none of the present top U.S. leadership in Vietnam meets this criteria. The need, then, is to replace them with Americans who do meet it. Although such Americans are rare, they do exist and should be positioned in Vietnam.

2) As part of the direct staff of the U.S. Ambassador, there should be a small hand-picked group of Americans who can devise strategy, advise the Ambassador, and also be intimate counsellors to Vietnamese who are in key positions of decision. They must be Americans whom the Vietnamese trust enough to share with them their innermost problems and expect understanding friendship, even if such problems arise in the middle of the night and are discussed under most informal conditions. Among Americans who would be able to play this role are Rufus Phillips, Lou Conein, and John Vann. There are others.

3) Added to this small group working directly for the Ambassador should be at least two practical American politicians, a Democrat and a Republican, who can work with the realities of Vietnam in counselling Vietnamese leaders in the construction of political parties based and organized among the people, in devising a form of representative government which they then help evolve into being, step by step as feasible, and in assisting the Vietnamese in keeping the existing government as stable as humanly feasible in the interim. Such a bipartisan U.S. team could be used to gain some positive dividends in the U.S., such as explaining the Vietnamese situation plainly enough to U.S. political figures here at home to gain harmonious support for the Administration's policy in Vietnam, as well as earning wide acceptance among U.S. political thinkers for the long-needed "cold war" operation of practical U.S. political work abroad. The U.S. politicians selected need to have wide repute for astuteness and integrity. Two names that come to mind for such skilled political work are Bill Benton, as a Democrat, and Walter Judd, as a Republican. Again, there are others.

4) Another addition to this small group working directly for the Ambassador should be a Coordinator of the U.S. effort, a person with demonstrated ability to get the U.S. operational echelons working imaginatively and energetically in willing teamwork on tactical, day-to-day, week-to-week operations, as the real executive assistant to the Ambassador. Further, he must be fully aware of the realities of Vietnam and be freed to participate as much as needful in personal contacts with key Vietnamese, as well as help devise the longer-range strategy. A person who played this role successfully in the past in Vietnam was William C. Trueheart of the Foreign Service. He should prove invaluable in an even larger role under the top leadership envisioned above.

5) Given U.S. leadership which would have the trust of the Vietnamese leadership, resulting in team-work at the top in Saigon, the concept of a realistic team-up of Vietnamese with Americans whom they really trust and respect should be extended to at least the next echelon, if not further. An effective way to do this, which would bolster Vietnamese morale tremendously while greatly increasing U.S. prestige, would be to ask key Vietnamese leaders to name the American known to them whom they would most want assigned as an advisor -- and then the U.S. should go to work to get that advisor sent to Vietnam for such advisory work, as a matter

of priority, for the best interest of the U.S. Past experience has shown that this would result, in the overwhelming majority of cases, of returning to Vietnam a number of Americans of unusual dedication and selfless service who infuse this same spirit among Vietnamese with whom they work. Admittedly, this would require a sharp change in U.S. personnel management practices, but its dynamic effect in Vietnam, coupled with a U.S. leadership there who would free such U.S. advisors to play the full role for which they are capable, could be possibly the single most important U.S. action in changing the course of the war in our favor.

6. At the same time, Americans who have served in Vietnam and have a strong desire to return there for further service, should be given a way of volunteering without prejudice to their careers in U.S. Services. Names of such volunteers, with notes of their specialty, their previous duties in Vietnam, and their personal reasons for volunteering to return should be passed expeditiously to the Embassy in Saigon for screening by the Ambassador and his immediate, special staff. In turn, the Ambassador will submit names approved via this screening to the head of the appropriate U.S. Service in Vietnam, for reclama to the Ambassador with cause or compliance in requesting individuals by name within a brief period, perhaps three days if this is reasonable under Saigon conditions at the time. Such requests from Saigon should then have priority over other considerations in being filled by U.S. personnel staffs in Washington. This personnel action, along with the others noted above, is made an executive action by top leadership mainly because, in a people's war such as in Vietnam, the U.S. people on the scene should be the most valuable U.S. assets. As such, they deserve top consideration by top people to get the committed American do-ers, who know how to do the right thing, out to Vietnam and doing so.

7. Still another change in U.S. personnel procedures can be accomplished in Vietnam by simple fiat under existing rules. The top staffs of U.S. organizations in Saigon need some realistic leavening of their thinking by adding the field viewpoint as plans develop, to ensure that U.S. plans and directives make practical sense to the Americans and Vietnamese who have to carry them out in the Vietnamese countryside. A ready way to do this is to select individual Americans who have proven themselves over the months in the field, away from Saigon, and give them the opportunity of

volunteering for a one-year tour in Saigon as full members of top staffs. This would infuse a heavy dose of field reality into U.S. thinking in Saigon, without the need to depend upon the presently overloaded reporting and paper-work systems. It is probable that a number of exceptional Americans, now on one-year hardship tours in the Vietnamese countryside, would volunteer for an extra year of putting reality into the thinking of Saigon staffs. It would be for them a "dream" assignment, not to be missed.

III.

It is by no idle design that the first steps towards getting a win in Vietnam are listed above as actions to place the right Americans into the right service there. The stark fact, which needs to be faced up to, is that the Communists are winning control of more and more Vietnamese people, along with the geography upon which they live, despite the great superiority of the Vietnamese forces backed by the United States -- in the size of the forces on our side, in the bountiful fiscal support they have had, and in the abundancy of modern weapons and equipment with which they have been supplied. Our side out-numbers, out-guns, and is wealthier than the enemy who is creepingly defeating us. Surely it is rational to put the finger on the management of these superior resources and say: change this management to one that can use these resources correctly to get a win. This is the crux of our problem in Vietnam.

For some obscure reason, which perhaps future historians might uncover while trying to explain the incredible, the United States has made small use of Americans who have shown that they know how to defeat Asian Communist subversive insurgency. The beleagured Vietnamese know who these Americans are and have pleaded with the United States for such help, in vain. We have given Vietnam everything but our winners in this unconventional type of warfare. It is as though a football team in the last quarter of the game asks for a field-goal kicker and instead sees the star catcher of the baseball team sent in who has never kicked before, a passer asked for and a pole-vault champion sent in, a defensive linesman needed and the captain of the debating team supplied. If such a team were then defeated, despite the money lavished on its uniforms and equipment, or the thick steaks at its training tables, where would the sports-writers and the spectators place the blame? The analogy is uncomfortably close to the reality of U.S. actions in Vietnam, with

the consequences in terms of historians as the sports-writers and foreign governments as the spectators.

Placing the "right" Americans into decisive position in Vietnam, and backing them up, would lead to proven strategy and tactics being employed by the Vietnamese into making the war a "pro-people" struggle on our side, giving the Vietnamese a cause to fight for instead of against, building up a representative Vietnamese political system the people willingly support as something of their own, and breaking the will of the enemy by using a superior political base for psychological, economic, and military actions. This is a proven way of getting a win and is in sharp contrast to the present U.S. theory being applied in Vietnam, of selecting an elite to form a rootless central administration and of a U.S.-supported military arm which conventionally attempts to destroy enemy units by military force: Using a further sport analogy, we are using a pro football team and are playing a bang-up game of football -- only, it is being played on a rink and the game, with its scoring, is hockey. We have scored a little, but our opponents' skill and knowledge of the rules of the game are giving us a bad licking. By switching to playing the right game, we at least can give ourselves an intelligent break.

As a post-script, it is not too early to start considering the consequences if we start winning in Vietnam. Certainly, the great majority of U.S. advisors would be phased out of Vietnam. Faith in American know-how would be revived in the free world, along with fresh respect for the United States in much of the rest of the world. But, do we then attempt to rest on defensive ramparts along the perimeter of South Vietnam, or do we try for a better resolution of the situation in Laos and Cambodia? Will the Chinese Communists remain in a static role or attempt seizing the initiative to continue their dynamic role? Or, can we induce the Chinese Communists to choose the static role by political arrangement or by threat? Or, once the United States learns to apply political actions correctly in the cold war, as a true instrument of its power, should the United States then use it further to enforce the Wilsonian concept of "self-determination" of nations by undertaking revolutionary actions to create proper conditions for such determination in North Vietnam, in China itself?

The further goal is worth solid consideration as we go for a win in Vietnam.

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