

Reflections on the Vietnam War: The Views of a Vietnamese on Vietnamese-American Misconceptions

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INTRODUCTION

During the past few years, we have been exposed to a myriad of discussions and reevaluations of Vietnam in dozens of magazines, newspapers, and television programs. In colleges and universities around the country there are hundreds of courses dealing with the American experience in the Vietnam War. It appears as if, after a long period of recoil and amnesia during which nobody wanted to hear or think about the divisive war; the citizens of the United States are now catching up with the study of this tragic event. Thus has begun the earnest process of making a serious and objective assessment of the lessons of Vietnam.

There is no longer any doubt that the war in Vietnam was a watershed in American history. Based on the available abundance of materials on Vietnam, there is clear evidence that the war is still much in the subconscious of the American people and that, denial notwithstanding, the Vietnam syndrome remains like a ghost, lurking in their minds. This is true whether or not time has tempered our judgments on the war and the way it was conducted.

History may never render a clear and final verdict as to what went wrong during the war and why American and South Vietnamese forces failed to prevent North Vietnam from achieving its conquest of South Vietnam. Many of the so-called "doves" who opposed the war at that time continue to condemn U.S. intervention as wrong and immoral. Many maintain that for these reasons alone it was doomed to failure from the very beginning. By the same token, many of those we dubbed "hawks" who supported the war, continue to believe that it could have been won if only the United States had had the stomach to see it through to the end. Historian Robert Schulzinger of the University of Colorado noted in this respect that: "As the war itself was divisive, its memory is divisive."¹ So the arguments will probably continue as long as there are different views, opinions, and perspectives, not only on Vietnam but also on larger issues such as those pertaining to the U.S. role in the world, the use of U.S. military

forces overseas or, in general terms, the advisability of U.S. intervention abroad on any level or in any fashion.

It would be futile in this chapter to attempt to address all of these issues. As a Vietnamese who happened, by the hazards of his assignment in Saigon and Washington, to be an eyewitness watching American and Vietnamese leaders at work during the peak of the U.S. intervention in the midsixties as well as at the end in 1975, I simply offer a few of my personal reflections on the war. It is my sincere hope that these reflections will contribute to "the quest for wisdom" that, according to Henry Kissinger, "America owed to itself if Vietnam is to leave any useful legacy."²

ONE MAN'S VIEW OF THE TWO VIETNAMS

The Geneva Agreements of 1954 divided Vietnam into two states at the 17th parallel: The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (North Vietnam) and the State of Vietnam (South Vietnam), later changed to the Republic of Vietnam. For the great majority of those in South Vietnam all they asked for was to be left alone so they could devote their energies to rebuilding their homes and families after the destruction of eight years of war. They did not take pleasure in the partition of the country imposed upon them by the big powers but, while protesting against it, they saw in it their only real opportunity for getting rid of the French.³

South Vietnamese citizens also hoped to regain their national independence as well as peace, albeit a temporary one, and the chance to carve out a prosperous territory from the richer half of Vietnam, one without Communist influence. As to the unity of the country, an ultimate goal for all Vietnamese, it would have to be a matter for future generations to decide. These later generations would have to decide when the moment was right for a *peaceful* solution to this problem.⁴

Southerners willingly waited for the reunification of their country. Vietnam had been occupied and divided many times throughout its long history, and all Vietnamese accepted the de facto and temporary partition of the country as a partial solution comparable to the situations in Germany and Korea. In a sense, ours was basically a defensive posture, a passive attitude, and our wish to be left alone contrasted vividly with the North Vietnamese Communists' aggressive determination to try to reunify the country immediately and at any cost. This was best demonstrated by Hanoi's decision in 1959 to support the creation of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam and begin a war of subversion to take the South.⁵

AMERICAN INVOLVEMENT: THE VIETNAMESE VIEW

The United States became deeply involved in the Vietnam War in the midsixties but, as everyone knows, the roots of the involvement can be traced back to the midfifties when, following the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu and the resultant

Geneva Peace Agreement of 1954, the United States decided to shore up the government of Ngo Dinh Diem and transform South Vietnam into an anti-Communist bastion.

Counting the years from the 1950s to the fall of Saigon, it was no less than two full decades that America was immersed in the Indochina conflict. In terms of coexistence and joint efforts between two peoples who shared the same goal of defeating communism, this was indeed a long period of time. Yet, strangely enough, the way I saw it, the degree of understanding between the two sides was such that at times, for many Americans and South Vietnamese, it looked as if there were two separate wars—one fought by the Americans and another fought by the South Vietnamese. In my opinion, that was one of the main reasons for the tragic outcome in Vietnam.

In looking back at this period one cannot help being impressed by the fact that, at the onset, the United States and Vietnam had nothing in common and that if it were not for the fortuitous geopolitical events and international circumstances of the post-World War II era these two peoples would never have come together. Indeed, two nationalities, quite apart in terms of geographical location, international status, civilization, culture, and conceptualization, were thrown together at a time when the Vietnamese knew almost nothing about America and Americans knew even less about Vietnam.

I still remember those days in the fifties and the early sixties. The few vague notions that we had about the United States involved the generous Marshall Plan in Europe, the prestigious Gen. Douglas MacArthur in the war in Korea, the decisive and moralistic anti-Communist stands of John Foster Dulles, and especially the idealistic inaugural address of John F. Kennedy: "We shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and the success of liberty."⁶

Vietnamese knowledge and understanding of the United States was, to be sure, limited, but the attraction to what America represented in the world was irresistible and that was the reason why, in their fight for freedom against both the French and the Communists, the South Vietnamese looked on the Americans as their natural friends and allies. They did not even question the virtue, or the right and wrong, of the American intervention. They considered it a logical continuation of the American salvation of South Korea. South Vietnamese faith in the United States was unshakable simply because, in the trusting, and perhaps naive, minds of the masses of South Vietnamese citizens they believed that such a powerful and seemingly omnipotent nation as the United States of America could not be wrong. Besides, they reasoned, the United States had never lost a war in its illustrious history.

But if the faith of the South Vietnamese in American power was total, their ignorance about America's people, culture, and politics, was equally profound. The great majority of the Vietnamese—including the southern leadership and intellectual elites—did not understand the American political process or the power of American public opinion. Having lived too long under one authoritarian regime

or another, southern Vietnamese could not evaluate the influence of public opinion on the U.S. Congress, or understand the influence that the Congress could have over a president and his administration in terms of budget and foreign policy. In fact, during my tenure in Washington, I spent a great deal of time dealing with this matter. Each time I was called home for consultations or my colleagues came to the United States on their fact-finding tours, I briefed these South Vietnamese legislators, military men, journalists, professors, and dozens of others. I tried to describe to them what I saw from my observation post in Washington. I tried to convey to them the changing mood of Americans during the tumultuous days of the late 1960s, the spreading antiwar feelings, the emerging conflict between the executive and legislative branches of the U.S. government which made access to foreign aid more and more difficult.

With their fixed ideas about the United States, they nevertheless regarded as inconceivable the possibility of a reduced American role in international affairs, and particularly in Vietnam, since they themselves had witnessed the huge U.S. investment and involvement in the midsixties. This inflexible vision was even more deeply rooted in the minds of the South Vietnamese military leaders who practically ruled the country during the last ten years of South Vietnam's existence. These leaders, having had close contacts for many years with their U.S. military counterparts and, to a large degree, having been conditioned by the generally conservative ideas of the U.S. military establishment, could not and would not believe that America would be compelled to withdraw in 1973. In fact, many South Vietnamese generals believed until the final days before the collapse of Saigon that the U.S. B-52s would return and wipe out the Communist offensive.

The innocence and naivete of the South Vietnamese can perhaps best be illustrated by my own experiences. In 1964, as a journalist, I made an initiation trip of three months to the United States. After that trip, I wrote some articles about life in the United States and what I had seen in San Francisco at the Republican National Convention of 1964. From that time forward, I was seen by those in South Vietnam as somewhat of an expert on American affairs. Thinking of it now, I cannot help but be a little embarrassed because there is a mountain of differences between even the little that I know now about America—American policies and politics, after three decades of painful and costly lessons—and what I knew then in the 1960s.

In politics, perception quite often counts more than facts. In this respect, the Americans were perceived by the Vietnamese as having a contingency plan for every situation, and of course the CIA was believed to be behind every move by the United States Embassy in Saigon. These misconceptions gradually led to an abdication of judgments on the part of South Vietnamese leaders and to increased reliance on the Americans. The American buildup in 1965 reinforced these beliefs among the South Vietnamese. Many in fact, were awestruck by scenes such as American helicopters ferrying, in some cases, hot meals to U.S. troops—even during the fighting. The Vietnamese marveled at the scores of

gadgets piled high in huge post exchanges (PXs) for the use of the American GIs. Many Vietnamese whispered among themselves that "the men of the affluent society have brought here a new sort of war," an "affluent war" that they had never seen or even thought of before. They witnessed the generous, perhaps excessive, use of bombs and strafings by American aircraft which lasted for hours and hours. In many cases these attacks were undertaken where U.S. forces had only encountered enemy sniper fire. Of course, the South Vietnamese were not then aware of the fact that hundreds of millions and even billions of U.S. taxpayers dollars were being spent to pay for the hot meals, PXs, and bombs. When protests later began in the United States most people in South Vietnam attributed America's growing desire to withdraw to the antiwar critics who believed, unfairly and wrongly, that all the billions of dollars being spent in Vietnam were on the South Vietnamese. Indeed, both sides misunderstood each other.

The South Vietnamese, in fact, failed to understand the real nature of the U.S. intervention, making erroneous assumptions about the staying power of America and, in the process, abdicated their own role in the war. This resignation which, in retrospect appears to be one of the most fatal mistakes made by my countrymen, was somewhat facilitated by their partners, the Americans, who either out of impatience or overconfidence, tried to do everything themselves. In the end, North Vietnam's control of their own destiny contrasted to South Vietnam's failure to create viable local leadership and was one of the most fundamental and important differences between the two factions. It may well have been why the South lost the war.

AMERICAN MISCONCEPTIONS

These are only a few examples which illustrate the innocence or, to put it more accurately, the ignorance of the South Vietnamese about America, and South Vietnam's basically defensive sociopolitical posture and military objectives during the war. The Americans, for their part, did not have any better understanding of Vietnam, its culture, or its people. To quote Allan E. Goodman, of the School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University:

A basic point must be made about the American ignorance of the Vietnamese. U.S. policy planners never had the kind of anthropological and sociological analyses of South Vietnamese behavior and customs that the French had of the North Vietnamese, for example. The classic work from the French era—Paul Mus's *Sociologie d'une Guerre* (1952)—was never translated into English. . . . In the years during which our commitment to Vietnam was in the process of gathering momentum, there were no academic programs of language study research in Vietnamese available in any U.S. university. Between 1965 and 1970 only twenty Ph.D. theses were done on Vietnam, out of some five thousand in the field of modern history and international relations. Throughout this period, moreover, Vietnamese studies were orphans in American academia. And when, in early 1970,

AID [Agency for International Development] offered \$1 million to create a Vietnamese Study Center there was only one taker.⁷

The Americans came to Vietnam with good intentions, and at least in the midsixties the power of U.S. military forces was so overwhelming that for many Americans it seemed not to matter much whether or not they should understand the Vietnamese. It was believed that there was no problem that could not be solved if America set its mind to do it, so the mood was "let's do it." Unfortunately, the war dragged on inconclusively, and in the end the contradictions were precisely those that stemmed from the American failure to understand not only the nature of the war, but also the mentality of both their friends and enemies.⁸

Together these mutual misunderstandings added fuel to the fire of Communist insurrection. For example, after encouraging the overthrow of South Vietnam's authoritarian leader Ngo Dinh Diem and putting ashore more than a half-million men and bombing targets in the country from north to south, the United States continued to claim that "it is not proper for the United States to intervene into the internal affairs of South Vietnam." After repeating over and over again President Kennedy's last public words about Vietnam, "In the final analysis it is their war and they are the ones who have to win or lose it," the United States *took over the war* and tried to do everything the American way with almost no consideration as to whether or not such a strategy would meet the complexities or local conditions of the war.⁹

Undoubtedly, Americans and Vietnamese had different habits and different ways of thinking; therefore, it was not easy for Americans to understand and evaluate the South Vietnamese. But the Americans made things all the more difficult for themselves by the rotation system under which they came into South Vietnam for a short period of time and then went home, making room for others to follow. With such a system, millions of Americans came to Vietnam, at a cost of billions of dollars, but few had the time, or the desire, to really get acquainted with the people they came to help, and especially with the very special nature of this war.

One of the many difficulties of the war in Vietnam that the Americans had to cope with was its complex nature. The good, the bad, and the ugly—you could find it all in Vietnam, depending on where you chose to look. Stereotype images and misperceptions characterized many Americans' judgments. To be sure, American misunderstanding of the South Vietnamese was one thing, but misunderstanding of the North Vietnamese Communists was another, and that was what hurt the most.

The whole concept of gradual escalation was, in this context, a vivid example of misunderstanding. It was based on the assumption that at some point the Communists would have to accept a compromise because the cost would be too high for them to go on fighting. The truth of the matter was, after having been assured publicly that their territory would never be invaded, the Communists

found that if they could extend the war indefinitely they could win simply by not losing. Their own heartland, despite massive, but often sporadic air attacks, would not be invaded. By the same token, the search and destroy operations in the South ultimately became a hide and seek war game in which the Communists controlled not only the place, but also the tempo of the fighting when and where they were strong. In turn, when they were not strong they could hide in their sanctuaries in North Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. Thus, they only had to survive, no matter what the cost, and wait for America to tire of the war, no matter how long that might take.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

The list of mistakes and oversights by both allies is a long one, but the more I have reflected on the Vietnam War, the more I come to the conclusion that a very powerful explanation for what went wrong in Vietnam can be found in the lack of understanding between the United States and South Vietnam. American military and diplomatic strategy was shaped by a profound misunderstanding of the Vietnamese—both friends and foes—of their culture as well as their view of the fundamental issues of war and peace. The tragedy did not come in one day, but was an accumulation of years of errors and mistakes the biggest of all, it seems to me, being the lack of effort from Americans and South Vietnamese to better understand each other.

It has been said that America lost its innocence and arrogance in Vietnam. As a Vietnamese, I would complete the remark by saying that South Vietnam had no arrogance to lose but instead lost its innocence and, ultimately, its existence as a free nation.

NOTES

1. See Robert Schulzinger, *The Wise Men of Foreign Affairs: The History of the Council on Foreign Relations* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1984) and idem, *American Diplomacy in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984).

2. For the attitudes and opinions of Dr. Kissinger, see Henry Kissinger, *Memoirs*, Vol. II, *Years of Upheaval* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1982), 9–43, 302–73.

3. In fact, most people in South Vietnam called the day the Geneva Accords were signed "National Shame Day." For details, see Robert F. Randle, *Geneva, 1954: The Settlement of the Indochinese War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 569–72.

4. South Vietnam Foreign Minister Tran Van Do, "Four Points Speech," June 22, 1965.

5. Statements by General Vu Ban to French newspaper interviewers, 1983; remarks by Le Duan, Secretary General of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), "Victory Day Speech," 1975.

6. *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: John F. Kennedy, Containing the Public Messages, Speeches and Statements of the President*, Vol. I, January 20–December 31, 1961 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1962), 1. The entire

inaugural speech can be found on pp. 1-3. Also see Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *A Thousand Days: John F. Kennedy in the White House* (Cambridge, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), 1-5. For details of Kennedy's attitudes regarding America's role concerning South Vietnam, see *The Pentagon Papers: The Defense Department History of United States Decision Making in Vietnam*, Vol. II U.S. Senator Gravel Ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 735, 738-39, 751-66, 827; Johnathan R. Adelman, ed., *Superpowers and Revolution* (New York: Praeger, 1986), 126.

7. Allan E. Goodman, "Discussion of the Vietnam War," *Conference on the Vietnam War*, sponsored by the Woodrow Wilson Center, January 8, 1983.

8. For strong and convincing arguments supporting this, see Douglas Pike, *Vietcong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1966); Douglas Pike, *PAVN: People's Army of North Vietnam* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1986).

9. This quote as well as the events surrounding the overthrow of Diem can be found in Neil Sheehan et al., *The Pentagon Papers (New York Times)* (New York: Bantam, 1971), 158-232.

10. For a more complete discussion of these issues of American misunderstanding, see Bui Diem and David Chanoff, *In the Jaws of History* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).