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FRIENDS OF VIET-NAM AND FORMER ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF THE
U. S. AID MISSION IN SAIGON, BEFORE THE DEMOCRATIC PLATFORM
COMMITTEE, CHICAGO, AUGUST 22, 1968

I appear before you as a member of the Board of Directors of the American Friends of Viet-Nam, an organization founded in 1955, to support a free and democratic Viet-Nam. I also have been personally involved in Viet-Nam for more than fourteen years, having first served as a military advisor in that country just after the Geneva Accords from 1954 until 1956; and then from 1962 to 1963 as the first administrator of American aid support for the pacification program. I have since been back in Vietnam in 1965, 1966 and 1967 as a consultant to the U. S. Embassy there. I am no longer connected with our Government. I am, therefore, speaking to you freely as a private citizen who has come to know Viet-Nam in a personal way, and to develop some firm convictions about our commitment there.

The latest polls confirm the fact that most Americans are holding firm against a dishonorable peace in Viet-Nam, despite their frustration over the war. I believe that the Democratic Party, instead of offering unrealistic panaceas for peace, should use straight talk to help our people better understand what the war is really about, to show them a realistic road toward an honorable solution, and to ask for their patient understanding and support.

You have already heard a number of solutions for peace in Viet-Nam, many of which use certain basic premises as justification for essentially abandoning our commitment there. I would like to examine these premises because I find them to be either wrong or unfair.

1. The first premise is that the war is diverting attention and resources from more important requirements at home.

That the war is costing us heavily is undeniable; but that it is wrong to spend money on the war while we could be spending it on urgent social and economic needs at home is a dubious argument morally and ethically. If our basic reason for helping our fellow man at home is because we care about people, because we love our fellow man; is it then ethical to abandon one set of people who are in more desperate straits than any Americans, for another set of people even though they be our fellow Americans. Do we really care about people, or are we only interested in salving our guilty consciences over our own neglect of those of our fellow Americans who happen to be black ?

By changing the way in which we are fighting the war, we could reduce its cost which would begin to free money to be used at home; but even if the war were ended tomorrow serious economic studies show that significant amounts of additional funds would not become available for several years. More important, if we as a nation think we are going to cure the social and economic problems of an underprivileged minority at home with money

alone, we will be no more successful than we have been in Viet-Nam, where we relied too much on the use of physical resources, and too little on understanding and caring about the Vietnamese people.

2. A second premise is that the war has impaired our prestige in the world.

Europe is not the whole world, but Asia is an important part of it. Our firm stand against the attempted communist take-over of the Viet-Nam, has enhanced our prestige in Asia. Convincing evidence of this comes from Asian leaders, many of whom have spoken out very strongly in support of our stand. These statements are on record and should be heeded.

Our prestige problems exist mainly in Europe where many believe we are neglecting them for Asia and Viet-Nam. Asia is easier to forget or to write off for nations who do not border on the Pacific. We have a Pacific coast; and Hawaii has an Asian as well as a native American heritage. We cannot escape either our geography, or the historical lessons of World War II and the Korean War.

3. A third premise is that military victory is our objective and there is no hope of a military victory or a satisfactory solution under present policy in Viet-Nam.

It is absolutely true that a military victory is not possible in Viet-Nam, short of an all-out attack on North Viet-Nam which would risk World War III. But the war is not a military war in conventional terms, it is a political struggle in which the enemy is using military means along with

political, economic and social actions to achieve a political end. According to the communist leadership of North Viet-Nam, they do not seek to defeat us on the battlefield militarily; but to psychologically and politically defeat the Vietnamese nationalists in Viet-Nam and the U. S., at home. They were not fighting a military war, as we know it, when they murdered 2000 Vietnamese civilians in Hue during the Tet offensive. When they murder thousands of hamlet and village chiefs and school teachers, their objectives are political. They defeated the French, not on the battlefield, but in metropolitan France. Will they succeed against the United States with the same strategy? Not if we Americans are mature enough and wise enough to stick by the basic principles which led three Presidents to make our commitment to the freedom of the Vietnamese people.

We should look back at Korea. We found the answer to blatant, naked aggression there. It was agonizing, but today South Korea is a free nation with one of the most rapid rates of economic growth in the world.

Now, we are faced with a more subtle form of aggression which cloaks itself in nationalism and self-righteousness. We have been learning how to cope with this new form of aggression which the communists call "Wars of National Liberation". It has been costly, and in looking at the cost of learning sometimes our vision becomes obscured. We forget that the non-communist Vietnamese are carrying out their own democratic revolution, and that despite twenty years of struggle against the communists they have

the strength and resiliency to go on fighting.

Recently a former candidate for the Presidency was convicted and jailed by a military court, operating under a 1965 decree. This happened primarily because the independent judiciary foreseen in the Constitution, had not yet been fully created by the elected National Assembly. Due process of the law, as we know it, is not yet operative. To focus solely on this lapse in democratic practice is to ignore the fact that over the last two years there have been elections for a constituent assembly, the adoption of a sound and fair constitution, the election of a President and a strong National Assembly, as well as local hamlet and village and city council elections. Since its formation, the Government has been legally changed once with the approval of the National Assembly. A Prime Minister is now in power who is generally recognized to be the most honest and prestigious civilian in the country. A growing coalition of non-communist nationalist political groups is underway. These are healthy trends but there is still much to be done which will require both time and patience on our part as well as understanding support.

4. A fourth premise is that the war is a civil war, with the Viet Cong being an independent and legitimate political force.

Viet-Nam is a very complex society, in which the Viet Cong are a distinct political minority. There are some 35 nationalist political groupings in Viet-Nam, at least two whose history antedates that of the Vietnamese

Communist Party. There are major religious groups, the Buddhists with over two million followers, the Catholics with one point seven million, and the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao each with approximately a million. There are more than 500, 000 Cambodian Buddhists and 500, 000 mountain tribal people as well as one point two million Chinese. These groups are not merely non-communist, they are for the most part anti-communist, because of their long history of struggle against elimination and suppression by the communists. At no time, has any claim by the Viet Cong that they represent more than 15 to 20 percent of the total South Vietnamese population ever been substantiated. The Vietnamese Government was able to register approximately 70% of the total population (eligible by standards of age alone) to vote in the most recent Presidential and Assembly elections.

If political and political-religious groups representative of at least 70% of the eligible voting population are already willing to operate within the legal framework of the existing Vietnamese Constitution, what is right or just about rewarding a distinct minority by elevating them to equal status with the present South Vietnamese Government. This is what proposed four-way talks would do, in which the Viet Cong would be co-equal with the South Vietnamese Government. A coalition government would be an even greater reward for their not merely illegal, but murderously immoral opposition. Is this the cause for which we have already given 25, 000 American lives?

As for the supposed independence of the Viet Cong, let me merely point out that Hanoi has recently made a major effort to create another front, the Alliance of Democratic and Peace Forces, quite evidently intended to serve as an intermediate political force to attract non-communist Vietnamese who are universally repelled by the National Liberation Front. It is interesting to note that the communists have been unsuccessful in attracting any nationalist leaders of prominence into this new front.

5. A fifth premise is that we have the right to impose a form of Government onto the non-communist Vietnamese.

The non-communist Vietnamese are unwilling to accept a coalition Government with the Viet Cong. They remember too well the first such coalition in 1946, in which the communists were initially a minority, both of which they used as a basis for eliminating by murder or intimidation most of their nationalist compatriots. The nationalists want to see some demonstration, after twenty years of gratuitous killing in the name, but not in the true cause, of Vietnamese nationalism, that the communists are willing to abide by the rules of the democratic process. For this reason free elections without some prior test of Viet Cong intentions are neither fair nor reasonable.

Now, some Americans, in their haste to get out of this difficult and costly conflict, are advocating that we force on to the Vietnamese our own political solution to this conflict. Unenunciated, but self-evident, is a new

principle in international relations, that the powerful nation giving assistance to a weak and needy nation has a right to dictate its form of Government. Is this what we really believe? Isn't this precisely the same totalitarian principle which the Russians are now applying in Czechoslovakia? By the same rule of thumb, since the French committed extensive forces, supplies and money to our own American Revolution, and most historians concede that we could not have won without them, this would have given them the right to dictate our form of government. If we put this new rule into practice in Viet-Nam, how will other nations in the world come to look upon us? Will they trust us?

I submit the idea that we should impose a political solution onto the Vietnamese people, in whatever form, whether through a coalition government, by direct talks with the Viet Cong, or through elections which are free in name only, is wrong morally, and is also wrong as a practical principle, to guide our relations with other countries.

6. A sixth premise is that Viet-Nam is unique, that we will not have to face similar challenges elsewhere.

We must always keep in mind that the challenge of "Wars of National Liberation", which we are facing in Viet-Nam, is not one of a kind. Such challenges will be with us until it is clear to the communists that they cannot succeed. We must avoid future Viet-Nams as represented by the massive size and cost of our present efforts. We must and can find a better

way of meeting this challenge. We cannot simply quit in Viet-Nam and then hope to take up the challenge elsewhere under better circumstances. We must work our way out of Viet-Nam in an honorable and just fashion, leaving behind something worth fighting for, or we shall be seriously impaired in facing the same challenge in other places at other times. And make no mistake, at least one such challenge - in Thailand - is already upon us.

7. What we can do in Viet-Nam -

First of all I believe that we must understand that our failure to win in Viet-Nam is not a policy failure, but a failure of proper implementation of policy, what we must do and what we can do to correct this is to make our deeds in prosecuting the war and in helping our Vietnamese friends more consistent with our own principles of self-government and of placing the welfare of the people first. We can do these things better than we have done them in Viet-Nam, by concentrating our support behind Vietnamese democratic political development, by cutting down the size of the American presence, and by shaping our military efforts so that primary emphasis falls on protecting people rather than killing them. Greater control has been placed in recent months on the employment of our massive firepower, but even greater discrimination should be used in the future so that where killing Viet Cong is in clear conflict with protecting civilians, we exercise discretion in favor of the civilian population.

Even more important to ultimate success is the continued but more rapid

growth of a cause, beyond self-preservation, which unites and inspires the non-communist nationalists. To help, we can legitimately insist that our Vietnamese allies live up to their own principles and ideals, as expressed in their constitution, and that they perform the deeds which will make these ideals come alive. Such programs as free, local elections up through the level of province chief, a decentralization of governing power to the villages, a sincere implementation of land reform, rule by law through an independent judiciary and other similar deeds are what I mean. I have no doubt that if the Vietnamese can put into actual practice the democratic principles of their constitution and thereby unify the nationalists and undercut the Viet Cong, that Hanoi will be willing to come to reasonable terms. Let us resolve then to help the true Vietnamese nationalists complete this task.

We can and we must find a better solution which is consistent with our own ideals and principles if we are to live at peace with ourselves and with our own consciences, as well as with the rest of the world. We cannot escape this challenge.