



## A European's View Of the Vietnam War

J. H. HUIZINGA

**T**HE DEBATE on Vietnam, as Harold Wilson has said, is characterized by "great passion, great feeling, and great emotion." The British Prime Minister referred to the worldwide indignation aroused by United States actions in that unhappy country. Believing as I do that the purely emotional protests against the war in Vietnam do not deserve the respect they often receive, I shall no doubt be accused of having a heart of stone. And it is true that when I went to Vietnam last year and took part in an air strike against the Vietcong guerrillas, I felt not a twinge of guilt.

There was a moment, however, when even my cold heart was moved to protest. "You gotta work over the area good and proper," the briefing officer instructed my pilot and his three colleagues. I was shocked; the man talked as if it were a question of plowing a field rather than of dropping napalm. Yet I remained silent, for on reflection I recognized my indignation for what it was: self-indulgent sentimentalism. The target was a Vietcong concentration in

a stretch of uninhabited jungle: war is war, and fire is one of its oldest instruments. These men had a job to do; one might indeed call it a chore, for they went out on these missions five days a week. They were bound to talk about their work in this businesslike way.

This is not to exculpate myself from the charge of insufficient compassion; on another occasion, I felt that it was justified. This was soon after my arrival in Vietnam when I spent several hours on one of its huge air bases, taking shelter from the blinding sun under the wing of the military transport that was to take us from Saigon to Hué. With clockwork precision, an endless stream of fighting machines, miraculously avoiding collision with the incoming traffic, roared into the shimmering air on missions of death and destruction. Still new to the war, I should have felt a sense of horror at the thought of what they would let loose on paddies and villages in the green land beyond. But no such pictures came to mind; I saw only a superbly organized death

factory at work. Just forty-eight hours after my arrival, the identification with "one's own side" had become so complete that everyone on the receiving end of the factory had become fair game.

It was here that my failure of feeling showed most clearly, for the tragedy of the Vietnam war is, of course, that so many people on the receiving end are *not* fair game. The average South Vietnamese peasant is in no way responsible for the miseries visited upon him. He is not to be compared to the German civilians who could be held largely responsible for the fate that befell them during the Second World War, but rather with the civilians in German-occupied territory. Indeed, he has even more claim to compassion than the occupied populations of wartime Europe. Like them, he is bombed "for his own good" because there is no other way of liberating him from his "liberators." But unlike the German captives, he has some reason to doubt whether the kind of liberation he can look forward to is worth the price.

**T**HIS BEING SAID, questions about the emotional opposition to U.S. actions in Vietnam remain: How legitimate is its indignation? How pure is its inspiration? First, it should be a chastening thought that one hears very little of this humanitarian protest among Vietnam's neighbors, such as the Thais. They know that if the United States were to settle for disguised or phased surrender, Thailand would be next in line for a "war of national liberation." It is a little too easy for people in the West to demand that the sufferings inflicted on the Vietnamese be brought to an end, whatever the cost to the Thais or Laotians. These critics should ask themselves whether they would be equally ready to advocate withdrawal if the United States were bombing Germany to stop Ulbricht's guerrillas from advancing to the Rhine.

Secondly, those who take the line that anything is better than a continuation of the war are guilty themselves of a lack of compassion and imagination. Before denouncing President Johnson for inhumanity, they would do well to reflect on the inhumanities that would result

from the policies they advocate. They might give some thought to the President's statement that "A just nation cannot leave to the cruelties of its enemies a people who have staked their lives and independence on America's solemn pledge."

A third point frequently overlooked is that the feelings of horror and indignation aroused by the Vietnam war are so intense, at least in part, because the war is so wide open to journalistic investigation. How much a reporter sees of the war depends entirely on how brave he is. And because some of the U.S. reporters are brave indeed, the public has had a much closer look at war than ever before. Certainly it is much closer than the reporting of the Algerian war, when the authorities were much less co-operative. Add the tremendous impact made by television, and one begins to understand why the Vietnam war has impressed the public so strongly. Because only the U.S. side of the war is public—what impartial western correspondent has been allowed to accompany the Vietcong on their operations and witness their cruelties?—a distorted picture results. A series of articles by one of Europe's most eminent correspondents, Robert Guillain of *Le Monde*, is a good example. Guillain devoted six times more space to the sufferings resulting from U.S. bombings than to the misdeeds of the Vietcong.

### Intellectual Fog

It is no accident that the tendency to give the other side the benefit of the doubt, manifest in the acceptance of the Vietcong claim to be spearheading a popular revolt, is particularly noticeable among intellectuals. The intellectual prides himself on his objectivity and independence of thought and is ever tempted to give "the other side," by whose recognition he demonstrates his independence, more weight than it merits. If statesmen have little choice but to oversimplify in one direction, painting the enemy too black and their own side too white, intellectuals are inclined to oversimplify in the other direction, reversing the colors. A striking example of this was Senator J. William Fulbright's warning that

his country "is succumbing to that arrogance of power" which has "afflicted, weakened, and in some cases destroyed great nations in the past."

There is an element of intellectual showing off in such statements. Few things struck me more in my contacts with U.S. military as well as civilian representatives in Vietnam than the absence of presumption and arrogance. They were quiet Americans indeed, remarkably good-humored and long-suffering, even under strong provocation. I saw one U.S. official in Hué standing in front of the consulate patiently listening to a long diatribe delivered by the leader of an anti-American



demonstration. "Thank you," he said with a smile as the young man at last handed him the text for transmittal to President Johnson. And I marveled at the modest, unassuming tones in which these representatives of a superpower spoke of and to their Vietnamese protégés. Judging by what I saw of them, they rarely throw their weight around and do not adopt the supercilious airs we Europeans often assumed in colonial days.

That so many people in the non-Communist world have become alienated from the United States because of Vietnam can partly be explained by a widespread historical misconception. As these people see it, the Geneva Agreements were a great feat of statesmanship, the first flowering of peaceful coexistence that subsequently was blighted by Sai-

gon's and Washington's violation of a crucial provision. The facts are rather different. The Geneva accords were imposed on the anti-Communist Vietnamese (who had died to prevent a Communist take-over in greater number than the French forces in Indochina) somewhat as the Munich pact was imposed on the Czechs. The sorry episode was well described in Donald Lancaster's *The Emancipation of Indochina*: "The Vietnamese foreign minister declared that his government would refuse to subscribe to any cease-fire agreement partitioning the country. . . . But on July 20, he informed the French Prime Minister with sorrowful dignity that his government would not oppose the impending armistice in spite of the fact that it considered such an armistice to be both catastrophic and immoral. . . . He proposed that the Vietnamese government's objections and reservations should be incorporated in the Final Declaration. His protest was brusquely dismissed" (by the French and the British).

AS FOR the agreement to hold elections, which Diem and Dulles are supposed to have violated, it exists only in the realm of popular mythology. It is true that Molotov, Chou En-lai, and Ho Chi Minh, not content with the partitioning that gave the Communists more than half of the Vietnamese population, extracted a promissory note for the rest from Anthony Eden and Pierre Mendès-France. These two ministers reluctantly agreed to a plebiscite within two years that would almost certainly have placed the whole country under Ho's rule. No wonder that those on whose account the check had been drawn—the non-Communist Vietnamese in the South—refused to honor it. Thanks to them and their American backers, the installment plan on which all of Vietnam was to be delivered to Ho by 1956 was foreclosed.

The South Vietnamese were perfectly entitled, both in international law and in equity, to disregard the declaration calling for elections—in law because they had remained mute when Eden asked for oral approval of this document that bears no signatures of any kind, and in equity because the con-

ditions for a truly "free expression of the national will" were notoriously lacking. A free choice presupposes freedom from fear on the part of both the candidates and the voters. And no one has yet been able to explain how such a climate can be made to prevail in a country where the contenders for power have spent years trying to vanquish one another by force of arms with all the bitterness and vengefulness resulting therefrom.

As for the obligations undertaken at Geneva by the United States, it may perhaps be argued that the American delegate's statement that "In the case of nations now divided against their will we shall continue to seek to achieve unity through free elections supervised by the United Nations to ensure that they are conducted fairly" was a very general endorsement of the *principle* of the Final Declaration. But it is nonsense to conclude from this, as Philip Noel-Baker has done, that the United States had a legal obligation to compel Diem to hold elections and that the failure to do so has "done more than any other event in the last decade to undermine the binding force of international law."

There is another reason, however, why those who hold Diem and Dulles responsible for frustrating Geneva's promise of a "democratic" solution of the unresolved conflict between Vietnam's Communists and nationalists are guilty of political naïveté bordering on willful self-deception. It is totally unrealistic to suggest that the antagonists in a long and bloody civil war should allow the issue to be decided by elections. Yet once again this idea is very much in fashion. Since neither can win a military contest, so the theory runs, the two sides must be brought to the conference table to work out a "political solution" that would allow the people of Vietnam to determine their own fate. As if there had ever been a civil war of comparable intensity and duration that was brought to a close by a popular vote in favor of one party or another or by the formation of a coalition government. And as if the experience of Laos had not given conclusive proof that peaceful coexistence between Communists and anti-Communists is quite impracticable within

one state once they have been at war with one another for any length of time.

### Europe's Short Memory

Something further must be said about the specifically European attitude that finds expression in the patronizing formula: "Of course, I am a hundred per cent with the Americans, *but . . .*," followed by a discourse on U.S. political naïveté and ending with: "You see, old boy, they simply don't *understand*." To my mind nothing has been more striking than the rapidity with which the Americans have adapted themselves to the stern exigencies of world power and responsibility. Yet today the attitude of patronizing disparagement remains particularly preva-



lent in Britain and France, where it can be traced to post-imperial spite.

I heard European diplomats in Saigon argue with great earnestness that the Americans simply have not yet grasped the fact that they have a revolutionary war on their hands and that such a war cannot be won with conventional tactics—as if the U.S. press had not expatiated on this theme for years. And as if the U.S. and South Vietnamese military commanders had not taken a leaf out of the enemy's book, fighting him with his own tactics. At the Revolutionary Cadre Center in Vung Tau, selected villagers grouped in Revolutionary Development Teams are being taught to reconquer the countryside with the same techniques used by the Vietcong and, in fact, deliberately copied from them by the U.S. instructors.

This may be an undertaking of doubtful merit. For if the South

Vietnamese are to be won for Saigon by armed agitprop teams—which is what the Revolutionary Development Teams are—the end product of this operation, a regimented populace, is likely to differ but little from that aimed at by the Vietcong. But it certainly does dispose of the charge that the Americans have not discovered what kind of war they have on their hands.

The view that Washington's international priorities are all wrong, that the attempt to hold the 17th parallel and maintain the status quo in South Vietnam is an unnecessary and indeed dangerous waste of blood and treasure, is expressed as often in the United States as in Europe. One knows the argument: The dangers of allowing South Vietnam to fall to Ho Chi Minh are less than those of stepping up the war, getting bogged down on the mainland of Asia, and forfeiting the fruits of a progressive détente with the Soviet Union; the West has little to fear from a reunited and Communist Vietnam since, far from allowing itself to be used by China, it would adopt a Titoist position. Thus the U.S. is fighting the wrong war in the wrong place at the wrong time, and in so doing fails as the guardian of the balance of power on whose maintenance the peace of the world depends.

Whatever the merits of this argument—which ignores the chain reaction that might be set off by a spectacular American retreat—it does not sound good coming from Europeans. Their record as keepers of the peace hardly entitles them to speak in patronizing tones of their "inexperienced" successor's handling of his world responsibility, for when the Anglo-French entente still led the West it allowed the balance of power to be tilted against it in Ethiopia, the Rhineland, Austria, and Czechoslovakia, until the landslide all but overwhelmed us.

**S**TUDENTS of foreign affairs should be able to recognize that the justification of U.S. policy in Vietnam depends on one thing only: whether this action is indispensable for the maintenance of the balance of power and the timely prevention of a slide toward ultimate disaster. Whether Hanoi is the aggressor,

whether the Saigon régime is reactionary, or whether the Vietcong represent a spontaneous popular rising all are irrelevant to the justifiability of the U.S. intervention. Once you accept that this attempt to maintain the status quo represents the lesser risk for the maintenance of peace, there should be no difficulty in supporting the President's policy.

To illustrate this point, suppose that a defeatist government seemed on the point of emerging in Saigon and that Washington, convinced of the importance of holding the 17th parallel, were to forestall the new government's assumption of power. One can imagine the howls of indignation of all those in the non-Communist countries who, blind to the bitter realities of our international jungle, refuse to recognize the jungle law by which one must live if one wants to live at all; the

law which, in the interest of peace, obliges all parties in the cold war to forestall or undo assaults on the status quo that threaten to tilt the balance of power against them. President Eisenhower recognized this in 1956 when he permitted Moscow to suppress a popular revolution in Hungary that might well have set off an anti-Soviet rebellion throughout Eastern Europe. Premier Khrushchev recognized it when President Kennedy compelled him to renounce his attempt to upset the balance of power by placing missiles in Cuba. If, therefore, President Johnson were no longer able at some future moment to maintain that the United States is in Vietnam at the invitation of its people, he could still invoke the bitter law of life recognized as valid by Washington in 1956 and Moscow in 1962.

These stern facts are what we

must respect, not "the great passion, great feeling, and great emotion" aroused by the U.S. policy in Vietnam. This policy is based on a calculation of how withdrawal or continued defense in South Vietnam will affect the peace of the world. Those who denounce the policy would do well to make the calculation themselves and consider whether they would be equally ready with their answer if they had to bear the responsibility borne by the man who will be called to account by history.

REPRINTED WITH PERMISSION FROM

## THE REPORTER

MARCH 9, 1967

# The Impatient Ones

Maybe the Americans don't have what it takes after all. What it takes in Vietnam is patience: the patience to slog on with a defensive war, and to accept the restraints on military action that this sort of war calls for. If the Americans can command enough patience, they can do what they set out to do in Vietnam. This is a bloody war, and an expensive one, but for the Americans the cost is a long way short of intolerable. Even if they go on taking casualties at the rate they have been taking this year, it will be 1970 before they have lost as many men killed as they lost in Korea; and it is unlikely that the communists can stand the present pace as long as that. The war is costing \$25,000 million a year; but that is only about half of what the Americans will be adding to their gross national product at the growth rate they expect to achieve by the end of this year. The United States can fight the Vietnam war and go on raising its standard of living at the same time. That is the measure of its economic power. President Johnson has the money and men to carry on the war at its present level for a long time to come. In this sense, he almost certainly has more staying power than Ho Chi Minh; and it is staying power that will count in the end. What Mr Johnson may be running short of is something else: patient public support for the whole idea of a limited war.

This is the only explanation of the latest extension of the bombing of North Vietnam. The attack on the Paul Doumer bridge in Hanoi is probably fair enough. The cutting of the bridge makes it harder for the North Vietnamese to get supplies through to their men fighting in the south. Unless a lot of bombs missed the target and killed a lot of civilians (and the *Agence France Presse* reports from Hanoi do not suggest that they did) this was a legitimate target. The attacks on targets in the previously forbidden zone along the Chinese border are another story. The most the Americans can hope to achieve by these attacks is to catch some supply trains a bit farther north than they would have caught them anyway, and make the North Vietnamese put a few thousand extra men on repair work. For these minor gains Mr Johnson is running a big risk of bombing China by accident. The Chinese would not necessarily intervene even if they did get bombed; but with Mao Tse-tung in a state of half-gaga desperation there is a distinct chance that they might. On this balance of advantages and disadvantages it is plain that Mr Johnson's decision to strike new targets has very little to do with any calculation about the course of the war in Vietnam itself. The President's real target is in Washington. He is throwing a concession to the impatient hawks who still believe, against the evidence, that more bombing will pull a quick victory out of the hat.

The danger is that his new move will destroy the middle-of-the-road majority that the President has so far commanded for his conduct of the war. Until now Mr Johnson has

managed to keep both his oppositions under control. Neither those who wanted more bombing nor those who wanted less have really managed to set public opinion on fire. But lately the thump-em-hard boys have come to think that the opinion polls are beginning to move their way. And now, by making this concession to the hard-liners, Mr Johnson has lost the backing of a number of former supporters who think he is taking an unjustifiable risk. The sop to the hawks has produced a reinforcement for the doves. No one can calculate the mood of American politics better than Mr Johnson can. He doubtless reckons that a few extra raids on new targets will bring the hawks fluttering safely down to earth again before a mistaken navigator takes a bomber over China. He may be right. But if the hawks remain unappeased we may be seeing the start of a polarisation of American attitudes towards the war. It is just such a polarisation that Mr Johnson has fought long and hard to prevent: he knows that, if it happens, it will in the end face him with a straight choice between total war and getting out altogether.

This could be the cost of giving way to the impatient ones. It would have been better if Mr Johnson had decided to ride out this attack from the opposition on his right just as he rode out the attack from the opposition on his left last winter. The President knows better than anyone else that the bombing of the north now has one real justification, and one only. This is not to break Ho Chi Minh's will to fight. That might have been the hope at the start of 1965, when the bombing began. When Ho first found himself faced with a different sort of war from the one he had bargained for—a war that was hurting North Vietnam too—it was on the cards that he might have decided to call the whole thing off. But he did not; and the relatively minor extra damage North Vietnam will suffer as a result of this month's new bombing is unlikely to change his mind. This is not because the bombing actually stiffens the average northerner's will to resist.

That is romantic nonsense, as anyone who has been through a prolonged bombardment knows perfectly well. It is because Ho Chi Minh does not have to bother much about public opinion, and because he knows that he can make good the material losses caused by the destruction of the fairly small remaining number of military targets by indenting for the necessary extra supplies from his Russian friends. The one valid argument for the present bombing is that it physically limits the amount of men and arms North Vietnam can send through to the south. It is an interdiction job. But this interdiction job can be done equally well without sending bombers to China's border. It would have been better if Mr Johnson had explained this to the hawks, and then ignored them.

If he wants to, the President can change the whole character of the war. He can order a landing in North Vietnam, if he thinks there is a reasonable chance of catching the North

Vietnamese army in open battle and destroying it the way the North Korean army was destroyed by the Inchon landing; but the North Vietnamese would probably slip away into the hills and fight as guerrillas. He can blockade Haiphong, and give Ho Chi Minh a real supply problem, if he is prepared for a direct confrontation with Russia. If he wants to attack North Vietnamese morale by the terror tactics that Bomber Command used in the second world war he could take his air force off pin-point targets and send it out on obliteration raids. He doubtless sees the difficulty of all these courses of action: particularly the last. But unless he is willing to embark on a new sort of war he must accept the logic of the strategy he has been following since mid-1965. The kernel of this strategy is the land war in the south. The bombing of the north is ancillary to this: its main aim is to harass the communists' supply lines. It also has the useful by-product of increasing North Vietnam's dependence on Russia, and thus in the long run increasing the Russians' influence in Hanoi. But it is not a substitute for the fight in the south.

The most worrying thing about the war this summer is not the raids along the border of China: Mr Johnson, who knows how limited their value is, is unlikely to push his luck too far up there. It is the failure of the South Vietnamese army to play its proper part in the fighting in the south. It is not just that this diverts many American units from the job of taking on the communists' big formations. It also means that the task of reclaiming Vietcong-held territory is going much slower than the Americans had hoped. This may be an argument for having another shot at negotiations after the autumn elections in South Vietnam, maybe on the terms that Mr Kosygin was offering in February. It may even be an argument, if and when negotiations happen, for offering the National Liberation Front a larger share in the future political life of South Vietnam than it has been offered in the past. What it is not an argument for is the idea that the struggle in the south can be short-circuited by adding ten or twenty or fifty more items to the bombing list in the north. Many Americans, watching this war on their television sets, find it so beastly that they conclude the only thing to do is to get it over quickly. It is no more beastly than other wars; it is just that for the first time in history a whole electorate can see what fighting is like. It will be a failure in the working of a free society if the Americans let themselves be rattled into believing that there is a wham-bang solution to their troubles.

REPRINTER WITH PERMISSION FROM

The Economist

AUGUST 19, 1967