

DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY

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SUBJECT: Command Information Fact Sheet

TITLE: Vietnam -- Questions and Answers

VIETNAM -- QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Most American servicemen on duty in Vietnam understand clearly why they are there. To them the issue is as simple as this--the Communists must be stopped somewhere, and that "somewhere" is in Vietnam. As Captain J. P. Spruill, U.S. Army, expressed it in a letter to his wife from Vietnam, where he later died, "We have drawn the line here and the America we all know and love best is not one to back away."

To assist in your understanding of our involvement in the Vietnam war, here are some questions widely asked, with brief and factual answers:

1. Why is the United States involved in the distant struggle going on in Vietnam?

Vietnam isn't the first distant place where Americans have fought. In two World Wars and in the Korean conflict, Americans went to far lands overseas to help other peoples fighting for their freedom and independence. President Johnson, in reaffirming the pledges of Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy to help defend "this small and valiant nation," has stressed that American military forces are in South Vietnam because "the United States is determined to use its strength to help those who are defending themselves against terror and aggression."

Incidentally, many foreigners crossed the Atlantic to help us in our own struggle for independence--men such as Marquis deLafayette, Baron von Steuben, and Tadeusz Kosciuszko. France supplied almost half the troops and a fleet for the final major battle at Yorktown.

2. Isn't the war in Vietnam really a civil war?

It is true that the fighting involves the Vietnamese primarily. But the war in Vietnam is no civil war. A 14-nation conference at Geneva in 1954 agreed that newly independent Vietnam should be divided into two parts--North Vietnam for followers of Communist leaders and South Vietnam for other Vietnamese. North Vietnam has since gone its own way--the way of a typical Communist dictatorship. South Vietnam became a republic.

From Hanoi, the capital of Communist North Vietnam, the Communist regime directs, controls, and supplies the war against South Vietnam, which is carried on by Communist guerrillas called the Viet Cong. South Vietnam is not in a state of rebellion; it is merely struggling to defend itself against the aggression from North Vietnam.

3. How did the Vietnamese people react to the division of their country in 1954?

Under the terms of the armistice agreement, the people were allowed to move north or south, whichever they preferred. Some 90,000 Vietnamese chose to go north to live under communism. Ten times as many--almost one million--fled to South Vietnam to escape the Communist dictatorship.

4. Was the division of Vietnam in 1954 intended to be permanent?

No. The immediate concern of the Geneva delegates was to stop the fighting. This was accomplished. The final Declaration of the Geneva Conference states: "The military demarcation line (at the 17th parallel) is provisional and should not in any way be considered as constituting a political or territorial boundary." The declaration also called for "free general elections by secret ballot" in July 1956 to allow the Vietnamese people to decide for themselves their political future and thus reunify the country.

5. Why weren't the elections held?

Using force and terrorism, the Communist regime in Hanoi quickly liquidated those in the North who opposed it. Because the people of the more populous northern half of the country had no choice but to vote as Hanoi dictated, the "free general elections" called for by the Geneva accords were obviously impossible. Consequently, South Vietnam refused to participate in the reunification referendum. Explaining this stand on 16 July 1955, President Diem pointed out that his country was pledged to the goal of "unity in freedom and not in slavery...We do not reject the principle of free elections as peaceful and democratic means to achieve that unity. However, if elections constitute one of the bases of true democracy, they will be meaningful only on the condition that they are absolutely free. Now, faced with a regime of oppression as practiced by the Viet Minh (originally a national independence force, this was under Communist control), we remain skeptical concerning the possibility of fulfilling the conditions of free elections in the North."

6. Is the United States a party to the 1954 Geneva accords?

The United States withheld its formal approval of the accords because of certain reservations, in particular the lack of a provision that the United Nations supervise the free elections throughout Vietnam. The American representative, however, stated that the United States would do nothing to disturb the agreements and that it would regard "any renewal of the aggression in violation of the aforesaid agreements with grave concern as seriously threatening international peace security."

Why do the Communists call the war in Vietnam a war of national liberation? For strategic and propaganda purposes. The Communists have pledged their support for "national liberation movements" throughout the world in order to disguise their aggressive activities and thus avoid arousing widespread opposition and censure. They try to exploit existing national revolutionary movements and to create one where none exists, as it suits their purposes.

Vietnam is a classic example. The Communists joined and eventually gained control of the Viet Minh (League for the Independence of Vietnam), which overthrew French rule after World War II. In 1960 the Hanoi regime deliberately created the "National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam" as a cover for its aggression and to create the illusion that the Viet Cong campaign was truly local in character and not directed by the Communists in the North.

Communist attempts to "liberate" Malaya and the Philippines after World War II failed, but they conquered Tibet in 1950 under the guise of "liberating" that unfortunate country.

8. Has South Vietnam held any free elections?

Yes. A referendum on 23 October 1955 allowed the people to choose their form of government. The country became the Republic of Vietnam. On a number of occasions since then the South Vietnamese people have voted in national elections. As recently as 30 May 1965, elections by secret ballot were held throughout South Vietnam for provincial and municipal councils.

9. On what grounds are North Vietnam and Communist China blamed for the aggression in South Vietnam?

When Vietnam was partitioned in 1954, thousands of trained Communist insurgents were ordered to remain in South Vietnam, where Communist arms and ammunition were hidden, and await orders from Hanoi. These men formed the hard core of the guerrilla forces recruited from all parts of the country. The orders from Hanoi soon came, and the aggression of North against South began.

As the struggle went on, in varying degrees of intensity, more and more evidence of Hanoi's and Peking's involvement piled up--captured weapons made in Communist China, documents identifying units of the North Vietnamese army fighting with the guerrillas, letters found on captive Viet Cong telling how they had infiltrated into South Vietnam from the North.

Hanoi tried to make the guerrilla fighting appear to be a genuine insurrection in the early years but now takes full responsibility for the Viet Cong. The Chinese Communists are not officially connected with the war, but they talk very much like partners in it.

10. Has Hanoi admitted sending troops into South Vietnam?

Yes, but they claim that their army units are "volunteers," just as Communist China called the troops it sent into Korea by the millions to fight U. N. forces "volunteers."

11. In what ways has the United States assisted South Vietnam?

The people of South Vietnam have had the sympathy and support of the American people since 1954. The first U.S. aid was provided to resettle the hundred of thousands of refugees from the Communist North, and economic aid and advice have continued to flow from the United States. When South Vietnam's national survival was threatened by the invading Communist guerrillas, the United States also provided military equipment and advisers. As Hanoi's aggression has increased, so has U. S. military support for South Vietnam, which now includes American combat forces.

The United States and the Republic of Vietnam, in the Declaration of Honolulu issued jointly on 8 February 1966, pledged to work for "a true social revolution" in Vietnam, a revolution to wipe out injustice and privation. The United States "will give special support to the work of the people of that country to build even while they fight. We have helped and we will help them--to stabilize the economy--to increase the production of food--to spread the light of education--to stamp out disease." Thus the United States is committed to an expanded program of nonmilitary aid, training assistance, and advice to South Vietnam.

12. If Vietnam is as important to the free world as people say, why don't other free nations share the burden of the fighting there?

The United States is not the only supporter and defender of South Vietnam. More than 40 nations are providing or have pledged military, economic, and technical assistance. Another divided Asian country--South Korea--is contributing substantially, knowing from experience how important it is to stop Communist aggression. Australia and New Zealand have sent military forces.

13. How much of South Vietnam is under Viet Cong control?

This question cannot be answered precisely, but the Viet Cong control far smaller proportions of the land and the population than they claim. Controlling an area and holding it are two different things. At the approach of Government forces, the Viet Cong can simply melt away into the jungle from areas they claim to control. The Viet Cong have failed to generate much popular support in the towns and cities. They are more successful in the thinly populated countryside where intimidation is relatively simpler. Defections and voluntary surrenders by members of the Viet Cong have taken place during 1966 at a substantially higher rate than during 1965.

14. How do the Viet Cong manage to establish their control?

By force and terror--by assassination, torture, and kidnapping. In 1964 alone, at least 1,500 local officials who resisted Viet Cong demands were kidnaped or murdered.

15. Do the Viet Cong attack only South Vietnamese soldiers and civilian officials?

By no means. They also attack teachers, agricultural technicians, health teams, anybody, in fact, who is working to improve social and economic conditions in South Vietnam. About 11,000 civilians were killed, wounded, or kidnaped by the Viet Cong in 1964 alone. Total civilian casualties in South Vietnam now stand at well over 60,000.

16. Is anything being done to lessen the influence of the Viet Cong in rural areas?

The government of South Vietnam is taking the social revolution to the countryside, where 85% of the people live, in order to better the life of the villagers and peasants and win their confidence and support. Revolutionary Development Cadres of young Vietnamese are trained and sent into villages and hamlets for a period of several months. They help organize the defenses against the Viet Cong and provide medical, educational, and agricultural assistance.

17. Why is the U. S. so deeply involved in the war in Vietnam?

The United States has increased its military support of South Vietnam only as Hanoi has increased its aggression. The United States is in South Vietnam to carry out a promise made in 1954 to help that country build and develop in peace and freedom, as the Geneva agreements provided. Although a substantial part of South Vietnam's resources and manpower had to be used in fighting off the Viet Cong, the country's peaceful development went forward steadily. Then tens of thousands of North Vietnamese Communists entered the Viet Cong struggle and the picture changed. The Communists made their objective plain: to drive the United States out of South Vietnam, and then to conquer the country for communism. It was then that President Johnson reaffirmed the solemn commitment of the United States to support the people of South Vietnam against aggression from the North.

18. Does that mean that the United States is out to destroy North Vietnam?

No. President Johnson put it this way: "We do not seek the destruction of any government, nor do we covet a foot of any territory. But we insist, and we will always insist, that the people of South Vietnam shall have the right of choice, the right to shape their own destiny in free elections in the South, or throughout all Vietnam under international supervision. And they shall not have any government imposed upon them by force and terror so long as we can prevent it."

19. What about U. S. bombing in North Vietnam?

Limited air attacks by the South Vietnamese and U. S. Air Forces on military targets in North Vietnam hamper the large-scale infiltration from the North. Also, they are a warning and a reminder that—as Secretary of State Dean Rusk said—"there are no longer sanctuaries for aggression."

20. Why is South Vietnam so unstable politically?

Modern representative government as we know it is still in the process of being developed in South Vietnam. The people are sharply divided on the basis of religion, culture, and region, and these divisions—between Buddhists, Catholics, Montagnards, and others—are reflected in the political thinking. Despite political friction and rivalries, the South Vietnamese have a strong sense of national unity and are, on the whole, united in their opposition to communism as a solution to their problems.

21. Is it our goal to establish an American-type state in South Vietnam?

No. The United States supports free elections in South Vietnam to give the South Vietnamese a government of their own choice. We will abide by whatever choice they make freely at the polls.

22. Will the war continue until one side or the other achieves a clear-cut military victory?

This is up to Hanoi and its supporters in Peking. The war was started by the North and could be ended by the North at any time. All that is necessary is for Hanoi to withdraw its forces and order a halt to the guerrilla warfare and subversion being carried on by its Viet Cong agents. Secretary of State Rusk expressed it in these words: "We ask only that they cease their aggressions, that they leave their neighbors alone."

23. What stands in the way of a negotiated peace?

This is a question that can only be answered by Hanoi. President Johnson has repeatedly proclaimed that the United States is ready to begin unconditional peace discussions "at any place, at any time," and with any government.

"Shortly after Christmas," Secretary Rusk continued, "we were in touch with all the governments of the world, more than 115 of them, as well as with his Holiness the Pope, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, the North Atlantic Council of NATO, the Organization of American States, the Organization of African Unity, and the International Committee of the Red Cross. Six special Presidential envoys visited 34 capitals, and personal communications from the President went to the chiefs of government of many more. When this massive effort at quiet diplomacy failed as a result of the scornful rejection by the Communist leaders of North Vietnam, the United States placed the matter before the United Nations Security Council for open debate.

24. Does this mean that hopes for peace in southeast Asia must be abandoned?

Not at all, so far as the United States is concerned. Nor is it the intention of South Vietnam and its other allies. The processes of diplomacy, said Secretary Rusk, "will continue in full operation, publicly and privately, directly and indirectly, in order that any possibility of peace can be explored and tested."

However, the United States and South Vietnam are determined that Communist aggression shall not succeed. It is hoped that once Hanoi is convinced of this, the way to the peaceful solution will be cleared. "I pray every night," President Johnson said, that "the day will come when others will be willing to accept our proposals and join us in our hope of satisfying these problems and dealing with these differences by talking instead of fighting."

25. When can we expect the war in Vietnam to end?

That is up to Hanoi. As President Johnson told the Congress, "the days may become months, and the months may become years, but we will stay as long as aggression commands us to battle." Commenting on this statement, Deputy Under Secretary of State U. Alexis Johnson said, "In this I feel that the President has the support of the overwhelming mass of the American people. If this is clearly understood by Hanoi, peace can quickly come. If it is not yet understood, the struggle will be longer and harder, but nevertheless peace inevitably will come."

Reference:

Department of Defense Fact Sheet, Number 26