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Vietnam: The Case for Extrication

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MOST OF the men who rule Saigon have, like the Bourbons, learned nothing and forgotten nothing. They seek to retain those privileges then have and to regain those they have lost. In Vietnam only the Communists represent revolution and social change. The Communist Party is the one truly national organization that permeates both North and South Vietnam. It is the only group not dependent on foreign bayonets for survival. For its own strategic and political ends the United States is thus protecting a non-Communist Vietnamese social structure that cannot defend itself and that perhaps does not deserve to be defended.

Our responsibility for prolonging what is essentially a civil conflict may be one of the major reasons for the considerable amount of confusion, guilt and soul-searching among Americans over the Vietnam war. I simply cannot help worrying that, in the process of waging this war, we are corrupting ourselves. I wonder when I look at the bombed-out peasant hamlets, the orphans begging and stealing in the streets of Saigon, and the women and children with napalm burns lying on the hospital cots, whether the US or any nation has the right to inflict this suffering and degradation on another people for its own ends.

I agree with the paragraphs above although I did not write them. They are composed of sentences excerpted from a much remarked-upon article in *The New York Times Magazine* (Oct. 9, 1966) "Not a Dove, But No Longer a Hawk" by Neil Sheehan, who has been covering the Pentagon since returning from Vietnam last August.

Neil Sheehan is not a Nervous Nelly, not a Peacenik, not a Vietnik, not even anything so supposedly un-American as an intellectual. He is a professional reporter who once "believed in what my country was doing in Vietnam," but who, as of October 9, 1966, no longer believes. Along with many of his fellow citizens, he goes so far as to "wonder" whether his country "has the right to inflict this suffering and degradation on another people for its own ends." His is the cry of anguish of an honest man who has gone far toward the realization that his country is doing something very wrong. He has not yet gone that one vital step further to the only attitude that has both practical and moral importance: the willingness to right the wrong. His cry of anguish ends with a whimper: "Despite these misgivings I do not see how we can do anything but continue to prosecute the war"—and with a pious prayer: "I hope that we will not, in the name of some anti-Communist crusade, do this again."

A professional reporter myself, with long experience in Vietnam, particularly the larger region—Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos—once known as French Indochina, I read Sheehan's article with strong emotion: admiration for the sweep and depth of his reporting; respect for his distress and soulsearching; bemusement as to why he did not include more of these facts in his daily reports from Vietnam; finally, a hot flash of anger at his grotesque conclusion that we must continue to prosecute an evil war that cannot be won. How many readers, like myself, clutched at their sanity as an otherwise lucid writer concluded that there is no way out of a frightful mess other than to dig deeper into it?

A Personal and National Dilemma

If this were Neil Sheehan's personal dilemma it could easily be dismissed in light of his valuable documentation. But the greater value of Sheehan's article is that it so fully reflects a national dilemma, broad and deep across the country and, indeed, within the government itself. I have met and talked with many Neil Sheehans, in the White House, in the State Department, in the Congress and in lecture tours, symposia, teach-ins and other public and private discussions of the Vietnamese war. At the Bankers Association of Omaha, the Community Center of Oak Park, Ill., the World Affairs Councils of Buffalo, Philadelphia and Chicago, the Forum of Miami, the Merchants Club of Dallas; from Garden City to Beverly Hills, from Minneapolis to New Orleans, in almost one hundred meetings with some hundred thousand people I have heard this same cry: it's a dirty war but we're stuck in it.

All of the evidence that I have seen, including analyses of the opinion polls, indicates that an overwhelming majority of Americans wants an end to the war. What clouds the issue is that the majority is divided into three groups: those who think the war can be ended by an all-out escalation, those who think it can only be ended by de-escalation leading to negotiation, and finally—perhaps the majority of the majority—those citizens neither hawk nor dove, who, as Sheehan correctly describes them, are confused, feel guilty, and let themselves be pulled into deeper waters by the powerful tides.

Of all the conflicting attitudes this war has stirred up perhaps the most extraordinary is one that every lecturer and teacher knows well; it astonished Senator Robert Kennedy on his recent trip to the Far West, when he was addressing the student body of a West Coast university. He told them that he was opposed to the student deferment system, which favors those who could afford to go to college. He was almost hooted off the platform. Startled at the outburst, Kennedy then asked the students whether they favored greater escalation, and they roared their approval. Such twisted thinking can be summed up: More War Without Us—or escalation without participation.

I have run into this attitude in every part of the country and not just among students. In Omaha, the executive vice president of a bank told me that he hoped we could

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hit hard enough to get it over before his son was drafted. Another man told me he had advised his son to study a special branch of science that would require four years of postgraduate study. "In the meantime let's bomb the hell out of them and get it over."

Get it over, get it over, is the cry heard across the nation. For some it is a cry of personal fear. For some it is a cry of moral anguish. For most, I am afraid, it is only a cry of anger—a howl of frustrated pride that has little to do with morality and everything to do with proving America's power and saving Uncle Sam's face. This attitude is most frequently expressed in the statement: Maybe we shouldn't have gotten into this, but since we have, we must see it through.

Perhaps the most prominent spokesman for this view is General Eisenhower, whose recent reversal of attitude reflects this widely held position. In October, 1966, Eisenhower said we must do everything necessary to wage the war successfully, and he refused to rule out even the possibility of using atomic weapons. Yet I heard General Eisenhower talk very differently two years ago.

I visited Eisenhower at his farm in Gettysburg, on August 25, 1964, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of the liberation of Paris. In the course of a talk lasting several hours the General reminisced about the French Indochinese War and the pressures he had put upon the French to conduct it differently. They could not rally the people to their side, he recalled, adding that no white, Western nation could win a colonial war in Asia. He then talked about our own dilemma in Vietnam and his decision to give economic aid to Ngo Dinh Diem to help him resist Communism. "That's the only way it can be done," Eisenhower told me. "We can only help them to help themselves." He thought then that we could not and should not try to do their fighting for them. Today he thinks differently and the reason is surely evident: our massive commitment to defeat Communism in Vietnam has in Eisenhower's view created a new situation.

Eisenhower has not contradicted himself. He now believes that the context has so changed that we need no longer concern ourselves with what changed it; perhaps we should never have gotten involved, but there is no point in dwelling upon past history. Historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. apparently agrees. He began his article "A Middle Way Out of Vietnam" in *The New York Times Magazine* (Sept. 18, 1966) by stating: "Why we are in Vietnam today is a question of only historical interest. We *are* there, for better or for worse, and we must deal with the situation that exists. . . . Our stake in South Vietnam may have been self-created, but it has nonetheless become real."

The Value of Looking Backward

Nothing could be more dangerous than this kind of thinking. The point in examining the past is not to cry over spilled milk or to indulge in useless blame-finding, but to find out what went wrong and why so that we might see more clearly, first, how to put it right and, second, how best to answer Sheehan's prayer that we don't do it again.

To illustrate the value of looking backward in the dispute, let us examine the question of the nature of the war, particularly the issue of aggression. The Johnson Administration talks constantly of North Vietnamese "aggression," sometimes simplifying it to "Communist aggression." Over and over at the Manila Conference, and in its final communique, aggression was the word used to describe the war. If we simply accept this charge without checking it against the historical record—that is, if we persuade ourselves that "now" is unrelated to "then"—it will be almost impossible, I believe, to find the way to peace. Hanoi will certainly not enter negotiations as the "aggressor."

Examination of the record would show a situation very different from today. (Is that why we are so often urged to forget it?) Certainly Hanoi is taking aggressive action now in sending regular soldiers to fight in South Vietnam. But Hanoi's view, which is accepted by most observers outside the US, is that the original provocation was committed by the South Vietnamese and by the US in jointly refusing to carry out the provisions of the Geneva Accords. North Vietnam did not send troops south until after the American build-up.

Hanoi has been reacting to both the American intervention and the refusal of South Vietnam to hold free elections. It is also reacting to the usurpation of power by a military clique that is not representative of the Vietnamese people, and not even of the South Vietnamese, since Premier Ky and his principal aides are refugees from the North.

It does not invalidate these facts to argue that Ho Chi Minh does not represent the people either, or that what we are facing is some new kind of internal aggression. That is precisely what all the turmoil has been about. From the very start there has been a civil war among the Vietnamese, not a Korean-like aggression by the North against the South. And if this fundamental truth cannot be accepted, then any kind of an honorable settlement is beyond hope. You can't settle a fight if you do not know what it is all about.

I do not speak of history only from hindsight. I watched all of this happen. I was at the Battle of Dienbienphu; when I saw the Chinese mortars going into position on the crest of the hills above the valley, I knew I was watching the end of the era of Western dominance in Asia. I flew from Hanoi to Saigon to Geneva with Prince Buu Loc, then Prime Minister of South Vietnam. I covered the conference and interviewed the principal actors. They came to the conclusion that Western powers could no longer determine the flow of history in Asia; that the best that could be expected for the West was an independent, neutralist Vietnam, Communist but not a satellite of China.

I have come to believe that period deserves the closest study by American citizens, not because errors were made or evil done intentionally, but because the leaders of our country, Eisenhower and Kennedy in turn, either were not aware of the dynamics that would follow from their decisions or discounted the dangers too readily. If we turn our backs on the dynamic process that led us, without intent, into a war we know we should not be fighting, how will we avoid making the same mistakes in the future?

Our predicament began with the judgment of John Foster Dulles—a correct judgment—that Ho Chi Minh had become so popular a national hero that he would win free

elections by a big margin (80 per cent, President Eisenhower estimated in his memoirs). Every informed observer concurred. It was not the judgment that was wrong, but the conclusion Dulles drew from it. Dulles decided that we must organize an Asian equivalent to NATO, support an anti-Communist leader in South Vietnam and stall off the free elections provided by the Geneva Accords. This led to Eisenhower's letter to Ngo Dinh Diem, our selection as anti-Communist champion, offering economic aid.

Eisenhower then believed that the South Vietnamese needed only our friendly help and guidance. This policy was based on America's brilliant success in Europe, where the Marshall Plan, the Truman Doctrine and NATO combined to provide the fruitful use of economic aid under a military shield against external agression. The error, of course, was the assumption that a policy that had worked in industrialized, technologically advanced, white, Christian Europe could also work in rural, backward, yellow, non-Christian Asia.

We also failed to understand how the mechanism of our program of aid leads inexorably from butter to guns. We start with the simple proposition that Communism is evil and should be stopped from spreading. Therefore anti-Communists must be helped. When we give economic aid, we soon discover we must also provide technological help.

To persuade Congress and the people to give tax dollars the anti-Communists are described as fighters for freedom. Whey they fail to carry out our proposals for reforms, the fact is hidden because more aid must now be given to prevent their collapse. The investment in aid and technical advisors becomes so great that soldiers are sent to protect it. The soldiers are shot at, so they are authorized to shoot back. The Communists strike harder to prevent the American program from shoring up the adversary. More soldiers are sent and bases are built. Once our honor and power are committed, it becomes our war. And once it becomes our war, then we devise new rules. Thus an Eisenhower who once believed that only Asians should fight an Asian war can two years later approve an American commitment greater than the commitment of the South Vietnamese themselves.

From Lucidity to Absurdity

How can we avoid the dynamics that lead from economic aid to all-out commitment? The mechanism that springs the trap is our unilateral programming. By giving aid directly, we directly involve our flag, prestige and power in the success of the recipient, and so become the servant of a Chiang Kai-shek or a Marshal Ky—men who stand for the very opposite of the democratic cause we suppose we are defending. If instead we gave aid through international organizations—the World Bank and OECD are two of many—we might find a palliative for the ills of our foreign aid program. We could commit American dollars without committing the American flag.

Maybe then we would not find ourselves in situations that inevitably become polarized into the fatal alternatives: victory or defeat. This false dichotomy is what leads a Neil Sheehan from lucidity to absurdity. He and many other Americans see only a continuation of the war or a "precipitate retreat, degenerating into a rout." Or, as I have heard it said again and again across the nation, "we can't turn tail and run." Of course that isn't the answer; the trouble is, it isn't even the question. The real question is how to find a middle ground between victory and defeat. Is there, as Sheehan suggested, really nothing to do but make a bigger mess?

It is at this point that a huge dense cloud seems to descend upon even the clearest-thinking Americans. We cannot seem to perceive the shape of that middle ground. Mr. Schlesinger called on us to find it in his *Times* article, but he did not describe exactly where it might be found. He saw no reason for "our reluctance to follow the Laos' model and declare neutralization, under international agreement, our long-run objective," but he only proposed de-escalation and put major emphasis on our need "to regain our cool." President Johnson too employed this in-cliche in his Princeton address when he urged his critics not to blow their cool.

But here I lose my own cool. It seems to me singularly inappropriate for anyone conducting a major war to accuse others of being overheated. Has President Johnson kept his cool in Vietnam in dropping more tons of dynamite on that tiny country than were dropped on Nazi Germany in World War II? Are doves really more hotheaded than hawks? Is there some intrinsic virtue in keeping cool before so tragic and cruel a war as this? Indeed isn't it about time to *get hot* about demanding an end of the war? It is said that Senators Wayne Morse and J. William Fulbright hurt themselves badly by losing their cool. Perhaps they did. But they have also done their country a great service, and were it not for men like them, we might still be awaiting responsible nationwide discussion of the Vietnamese and Chinese issues.

It is at this point that I feel only an intense anguish for the crisis of my profession and of my country. I know that Neil Sheehan is not the only reporter to suspect that he had been fooled, not the only correspondent to be torn between the realization that the war is corrupting us and a failure to see any honorable way out of it. I watch my colleagues agonizing about it, struggling to keep cool, but ending up by stepping away from the truth. They denounce the war but advocate that we continue to prosecute it. It is not that the press is cynical, but it seems paralyzed by the war, an avowed mistake, the correction of which appears so difficult and costly that it seems easier just to continue it.

Many fellow countrymen, like my colleagues, recognize the mess but cannot agree on how to clean it up. Some advocate greater peace efforts; others, the plurality, greater efforts to win. Both doves and hawks agree, however, on the desirability of ending the war swiftly. Hardly anyone has much stomach for Johnson's policy of a long, hard war.

Is It Too Late to Reverse Our Error?

It is at this point that someone inevitably asks: what can be done about it? I would suggest first of all that we stop using such loaded words as withdraw or retreat. Our problem is rather to *extricate* ourselves from a difficult position, not to fight our way out or to turn tail and run. To extricate ourselves would require a lot of truth-telling. Yet very few Americans even try to examine what others think is the truth.

We charge China with being aggressive and expansionist, but most of the world believes that *we* are the expansionist power. American soldiers, businessmen, and technicians are seen almost everywhere in the world. Hardly a single Chinese soldier is seen outside China,

and few Chinese diplomats or technicians are seen anywhere. We believe we are not expansionist because we clearly do not covet territory, but we fail to see that others regard the extension of influence on a global scale as a new form of expansionism. They do not believe that we are in Vietnam only to prevent a South Vietnamese Communist victory of a South Vietnamese military clique. They have long believed—and feel their suspicions confirmed by President Johnson's Asian tour—that the US, a Pacific power, now has a new objective: to extend its power from the Pacific to the continent of Asia.

I have never believed that America's vital interests were at stake in the Vietnamese civil war. I have never accepted the correlation between Munich and a settlement in Vietnam. Mao Tse-tung is not a Hitler, nor is Ho Chi Minh his servant. North Vietnam is not a powerful imperialist nation like Germany. If Ho is comparable to any European, he is the Tito of Asia. That is, a national Communist, at the head of a small state, trying to keep independent of an enormous Communist neighbor—in the case of Tito, Russia, in the case of Ho, China. If we can live with Tito to the tune of one billion dollars of aid, why is it so unthinkable to live in a world with Ho? Why do we fight for the South Vietnamese when we did not go to war for the Freedom Fighters of Hungary or for the East Germans? By what logic do we now offer more trade and closer relations with Russia and all of Eastern Europe but feel we must make war in Vietnam?

The crux of the matter is this: should not the Vietnamese have been permitted to determine their own fate in the first place? And is it now too late to reverse that error? Can we not return to the basic principle of the Geneva Accords: the creation of a military cease-fire and the beginnings of a negotiation among the Vietnamese themselves by themselves, between the NLF and Saigon in the South and also between South and North?

The Answer: Neutralization

It seems to me to be possible and certainly desirable for the US to change its role from belligerent to interested party, one among many who have an important stake in peace in Asia. Japan, India and Pakistan surely should be associated with efforts to end the war and encourage negotiations among the Vietnamese. The only way such negotiations could succeed and produce an enduring peace would be to quarantine Vietnam off from the world power competition, that is, to neutralize it.

By "neutralize" I mean something comparable in spirit and form to the neutralization of Austria. All foreign forces—Russian, American, French and British—were withdrawn from Austria. The Austrians drafted a constitution under which the country would not enter into a military alliance with any foreign power. This did not preclude many forms of cooperation between Austria and the West. Austria was neutralized but not neutral. This represented a real sacrifice on the part of the Russians for they were pulling out of a country they knew would henceforth be Western-oriented even in its neutralized state. They did not, of course, withdraw very far—just across the border to Hungary.

But we would not be very far off from Vietnam either, if we withdrew as a result of a treaty of neutralization. Our Navy and Air Force control the seas and air of Vietnam. And we have a firm base of operations in Thailand. There would be no great strategic danger of a phased withdrawal as a result of a negotiated treaty of neutralization. South Vietnam, without direct American military engagement, might not be able to maintain itself as a non-Communist state. The Communists might well be the dominant element of a coalition government. But which is the greater danger to America and the world: a nationalist-Communist Vietnam, neutralized by an Asian treaty, guaranteed by the great powers, or the current danger that Vietnam might become a world battlefield?

I feel strongly that it is possible to bring about a situation now where all foreign forces can be withdrawn, and Vietnam first, neighboring countries later, brought under a general great-power agreement to guarantee the neutralization of Southeast Asia. Britain has already indicated it would approve. So has Russia. General de Gaulle proposed the neutralization of Southeast Asia as far back as 1964. Eventually, and the sooner the better, China would have to be brought into the great-power agreement. There can never be any stability in Asia without Chinese consent—certainly not now that China has become a nuclear missle power. There would still be great problems. Neutralization would not solve any of the internal problems of the states in Southeast Asia, but it would solve the external problem, which is becoming the gravest problem in the world.

Neutralization is not a blueprint. No detailed plan would be of any real value today in any case. What is more immediately important than a plan is a change of attitudes and of objectives. If it becomes more important to Americans to end the anguish of this war than to continue it, there will be no problem finding a plan. Plans are, after all, only ways of carrying out what one wants to do. If we want to end the war, to keep Southeast Asia from becoming a world battleground, to neutralize it for everyone's safety, then the detailed plan will easily be found.

Neither a plan nor a prayer would be meaningful except in the service of a new policy.

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In a recent joint meeting of two Senate committees considering a supplemental appropriation for the war in Vietnam, we find the following interchange:

Chairman Russell: [Deleted]
Secretary McNamara: [Deleted]
[Colloquy deleted]
General Wheeler: [Deleted]
Chairman Russell: [Deleted]
Senator Symington: Will the Chair yield for a question?
Chairman Russell: [Deleted]
General Wheeler: [Deleted]

This illuminating discussion came shortly after the senators and the witnesses had considered the adequacy and fairness of news reporting from Vietnam. The subject which seemed to require so many deletions was that of government sponsorship of trips of private groups to Vietnam. Chairman Richard Russell let the cat out of the bag. "I realize that it is well to have the war as popular as possible, but there is no way to make this war popular – I don't care how many groups go out there." After that admission, why the deletions?

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