

Revolution and Continuity

Vietnamese commentators outdo one another in repeating that “history is both revolution and continuity.” Confucius hasn’t been burned in effigy on Hanoi’s Ba Dinh Square. The going political creed is Marxism, but “the work of scholars” is part of “the nation’s heritage the new society must assimilate,” as Nguyen Khac Vien pointed out in his “Experiences Vietnamiennes” (Editions Sociales, Paris). The “revolution” absorbs, as it were, the Confucian “continuity.”

The Vietnamese have always been ready to talk about their history stretching over thousands of years. When the writer-tactician Nguyen Trai helped Le Loi to found the Le Dynasty in 1428, he observed: “We have raised the banner to drive the aggressor out. Our homeland, the land of a civilization thousands of years old . . .”

Here the Confucian Nguyen Trai is speaking like the North Vietnamese Communist Party’s First Secretary Le Duan and Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap, without paradox, one might say. So the revolutionary break smacks of the countryside. A nation of peasants has spawned an army of engineers skilled in handling radar and missiles. But if tactics may sometimes be described as being “Russian” (tank onslaughts) or “Chinese” (encircled cities), the attacks are led by Vietnamese revolutionaries who are plugged into their backgrounds — hence into their traditions — and are politically motivated by the desire to change social relationships.

Pitted against the Vietnamese determination to be Vietnamese, the American determination to win weakened to the point of an agonizing defeat. As it was leading the struggle to prop up the status quo, Washington could count only on a Vietnamese society without roots in the people. Because the Americans did not have the peasants with them, and could find no foothold for their action in the Vietnamese culture, they tried to change the country’s human layout in the hope of thereby changing its political belief. The villager who refused to go along would have

his straw hut burned down, and millions of forcibly urbanized and rural families would — Washington hoped — change their outlook and provide a social base for the Saigon regime.

But the campaign was a total flop. Anti-communism was no more reinforced by the “new life hamlets” of Diem’s time and the shanty lines which sprang up around cities at a later date than by the Asia Development Bank’s economic plans (without altering returns on investment, or the suggestions of World Bank experts. Imported values were at first resented as an aggression. At the very height of the American war, the Vietnamese in Saigon were dreaming of Vietnam.

These facts must be borne in mind to understand what is happening and raise a few questions concerning the future, even without being able to offer any answers to them.

It’s no accident that the urban population did not rally to the defense of a concept of liberty defined abroad, and that Thieu’s army fizzled out. From now on most of the Vietnamese population will probably be subjected to what foreigners will not fail to describe as “a purification conducted by the North’s austere cadres.” It may be fairer to describe it as a rediscovery of traditional values. The Vietnamese are very straightlaced: a Hanoi party official, for example, told me he was shocked by a scene in a film, which wasn’t American, but Czechoslovak. They respect the family, old persons in particular, and one criticism they level against America is that it created a situation where young children, deprived by poverty, mug old persons to steal a few pennies. When mutinous Saigon soldiers ploughed over the Thieu family’s burial vault, it was a sacrilegious gesture by which they hoped to undo another: Nguyen Van Thieu’s renunciation of his Vietnamese past, his betrayal of his ancestors.

A thorough, deep-rooted unification of the country must be preceded by this determination of the Vietnamese to rediscover their own identity and in their own country. But it

pre-supposes other conditions.

The first is social and economic. The North has been Socialist for over 20 years. Changing the South’s social patterns will necessarily require time, especially if the authorities want to avoid the “serious mistakes” made by the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1955, which are pointed out in the quite official history of Vietnamese Communism. How is agrarian reform (initiated only last year in the North) going to be applied? How are the peasants going to be organized? A good many of the farmers in the Nan Bo Delta (the former Cochin China) have for some time been used to working with machines, which are still rare in the North. The Southerners have been in contact with a “modern” world. “Modern? Watch out!” I was told recently in Hanoi. “Who’s modern? The peasant with a cultivator in an unchanged society? Or the one from the Delta or the Red River, whose outlook has evolved and who keeps his books cooperatively and is beginning to shake off his feudal past?”

Reconstruction will also be necessary, and for this the South will need outside help, but without political strings. Anyone flying over the 17th parallel to Hue can gauge the extent of the disaster. Vast stretches of forest have disappeared. The soil is unusable in whole districts. Since 1970, a quarter of the buffalo herd in the South has perished. Chemicals employed in the war are continuing to cause havoc.

Besides it is premature to say that the whole of the country is going to be shortly run by a single government. The North is on the Socialist side, but already the South’s revolutionary government is reasserting its determination to take its place among the non-aligned nations of the world. This decision could prod Hanoi into moving away from other Communist countries, and, without switching sides but capitalizing on the South’s special features, throwing its lot in with a Third World still seeking its own way.

The Communist Party — known as
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by Jacques Decornoy

principle of official ideology will stand: Alone among the states of the world, the U.S. has the authority to impose its rule by force. Correspondingly, the authentic peace movement, which challenged this basic doctrine, must be excluded from all future debate. Its position does not even enter into the "complex disagreement" that so troubles the editors of the *N. Y. Times*.

It is interesting that not a single letter was published challenging the remarkable editorial stand of the *Times*. I say "published." At least one was sent; probably many more. The *Times* has seen fit to publish quite a range of opinion, including a proposal that we undertake nuclear bombardment. But there must, after all, be some limits in a civilized journal.

The *Times* is not alone in trying to restrict discussion to the narrow and trivial issues formulated in its editorials. The *Christian Science Monitor* gives this assessment:

Many voices, including this newspaper, regard the communist victory as a tragedy, believing the U.S. involvement in Vietnam to have been honorable, although the conduct of the war in both its political and military phases was fraught with mistakes and misjudgments. Others will argue, with equal cogency, that America should long ago have realized its mistakes and moved rapidly to extricate itself and permit the South Vietnamese to work things out for themselves. But surely there can be a unifying consensus . . . (April 22)

Note that the opposing view is assumed to share the *Monitor's* basic premises, while differing on a question of timing. In fact, this is the standard position put forth in the national media, with a few honorable exceptions. Criticism of state policy is always welcome, but it must remain within civilized bounds. An Arthur Schlesinger may express his skepticism with regard to Joseph Alsop's prediction that the American war will succeed, for he goes on to stress that "we all pray that Mr. Alsop will be right." It is obvious, without discussion, that any right-thinking person must pray for the victory of American arms. As Schlesinger explained in 1966, American policy may yet succeed, in which event "we may all be saluting the wisdom and statesmanship of the American government" in conducting a war that was turning Vietnam into "a land of ruin and wreck." But he thought success to be unlikely. Had he gone on to urge that the U.S. abandon its failed enterprise, the *Monitor* would concede, in retrospect, that this extreme proposal had cogency equal to its own.

The *Washington Post* has been the most consistent critic of the war among the national media. Consider, then, its editorial response to the termination of the war. In an April 30 editorial entitled "Deliverance," the *Post* insists that we can "afford the luxury of a debate" over the meaning of this "particular agony." Americans should develop "a larger judgment of the war as a whole," but it must be a balanced judgment, including both the positive and negative elements:

For if much of the actual conduct of Vietnam policy over the years was wrong and misguided – even tragic – it cannot be denied that some part of the purpose of

that policy was right and defensible. Specifically, it was right to hope that the people of South Vietnam would be able to decide on their own form of government and social order. The American public is entitled, indeed obligated, to explore how good impulses came to be transmuted into bad policy, but we cannot afford to cast out all remembrance of that earlier impulse. For the fundamental "lesson" of Vietnam surely is not that we as a people are intrinsically bad, but rather that we are capable of error – and on a gigantic scale. That is the spirit in which the post-mortems on Vietnam ought now to go forward. Not just the absence of recrimination, but also the presence of insight and honesty is required to bind up the nation's wounds.

Note again the crucial words: "wrong," "misguided," "tragic," "error." That is as far as "insight and honesty" can carry us in reaching our judgment.

The *Post* encourages us to recall that "some part of the purpose" of our policy in Vietnam was "right and defensible," namely, our early effort to help the people of South Vietnam "to decide on their own form of government and social order." Surely we must agree that it is right and defensible to help people to achieve this end. But exactly when was this "early impulse" revealed in action? Let us try to date it more precisely, recalling on the way some of the crucial facts about the war.

[WHERE DID WE GO WRONG?]

W as it in the pre-1954 period that we were trying to help the people of South Vietnam in this way? That can hardly be what the *Post* editors have in mind. At that time, the United States was backing the French in their effort to reconquer Indochina. As Truman's Secretary of State Dean Acheson noted, success in this effort "depends, in the end, on overcoming opposition of indigenous population." The Vietnamese resistance forces were led by Ho Chi Minh, whose appeals for American assistance had been rebuffed. No one had the slightest doubt that he had immense popular support as the leader of Vietnamese national forces. But, Acheson explained, "Question whether Ho is as much nationalist as Commie is irrelevant." He is an "out-right Commie." We must therefore help the French who are determined, in Acheson's phrase, "to protect IC [Indochina] from further COMMIE encroachments." Nothing here about helping the people of South Vietnam to determine their own fate.

Perhaps it was after the Geneva Accords that our "early impulse" flourished. Hardly a plausible contention. The ink was barely dry on the agreements when the National Security Council (NSC) adopted a general program of subversion to undermine the political settlement, explicitly reserving the right to use military force "to defeat local Communist subversion or rebellion not constituting armed attack"—that is, in direct violation of the "supreme law of the land." Such force might be used "either locally or against the external source of such subversion or rebellion (including Communist China if determined to be the

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The Press at War

Nothing so betrayed America's mission in Indochina as the ending of it; no glory was more vain, no honor more tarnished, no self-deception more complete. From the victory of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia through the Vietnamese offensive, the Baby-lift, and the evacuation of Saigon, the American government and the press recapitulated and exaggerated all the failures of the last three decades: the prejudices, misunderstandings, faulty analyses, blind predictions and false reports that produced and prolonged the war in every stage. And at the end — if indeed it is the end — Americans for the most part missed the point of defeat: it was not so much what they did not do, as what they did not know.

I say "they," perhaps immodestly, because I feel a distance from the opinion molders and mongers of official America whose misconceptions of Vietnam and the war have become standard history. A pall of mindless legitimacy hangs over the politicians and publicists who have for years avoided or ignored the other America of alternative news sources, radical analysts and anti-war activists. Some other history will have to absolve us. Even the most blatant confirmation of what "illegitimate" sources have been saying all along is unacceptable to the press that is read, watched or heard by most Americans.

Since Watergate, journalists have been indulging their sense of self-importance with congratulations all around for the job of saving the Republic with a little muckraking. The events of Indochina this spring have only extended that pride of profession. For the sturdy center of American journalism — the networks, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the newsmagazines and like-minded outfits — the lesson of Vietnam (and, by inference, Cambodia) is that it was the wrong war, at the wrong time, in the wrong place, etc. That was the notion bruited by David Halberstam and his quagmire colleagues in the early 1960s, and after a bit of argument from unthinking fogeys, accepted by the major media. The ultimate defeat of United States policy in Indochina "proved" the Halberstam thesis correct.

To accept that simple lesson is not to learn much about America, the countries of Indochina, or the world. A *Times* reporter or a CBS correspondent can yammer about the "wrong war" until he's blue in the nose, and never mention imperialism, capitalism, revolution, class or race. In fact, the standard ideology of the Indochinese wars is as simple and as simple-minded as the theory of a football game: which is hardly surprising, since war correspondents are generally sports reporters *manqués*, and Presidents — notoriously — are football coaches by other means. The problem with football ideology, however, is that it is all plays and no



by Andrew Kopkind

politics. What is important is the score, the star, the surface action. Translated journalistically onto the Indochinese battlefield, that ideology focuses on battles rather than social movements: body counts, generals, military tactics.

The press was unprepared for the *denouement* of the war not because reporters missed a crucial interview during the 1973-74 "half time," or because they were too busy elsewhere, but because those factors which were to be critical did not fit into the available categories for discussion. Specifically, they never adequately explained that the basis of the 1973 Paris Agreement was the promise made by the United States and the Thieu government to recognize the Provisional Revolutionary Government as a political and administrative force in South Vietnam: and that the failure to fulfill that promise gave the P.R.G. no alternative but to enforce it by any means necessary.

Despite the repeated examples of lies from American and Saigon officials of every rank, American reporters continued to rely on these usually unreliable sources. What they got were wrong "facts" and useless opinions. The State Department never departed from the line taken in its discredited White Paper of 1965 that the war in Vietnam was occasioned by "invasion from the North," and much of the press continued to echo that theme. The picture of events in Vietnam that filtered back home to America placed the North Vietnamese army poised for attack against a South Vietnamese republic firmly under the control of the administration in Saigon. At least that is what the U.S. Embassy and the Thieu government told the reporters, and why look elsewhere for explanations?

The P.R.G. and the Khmer Rouge remained "enigmatic" and inscrutable, phantoms that slipped in and out of jungles and could not be reached for comment as easily as the press attaché at the U.S. Military Mission. Even the respectable press referred to the opposition forces as "Reds," or "Communists," which obscured the real politics of the war and made it impossible to discern the factors in the steady deterioration of the Thieu government in Saigon and the Lon Nol government in Phnom Penh. While the few Left reporters and anti-war movement news services with correspondents on the spot easily detected the cracks and strains in the central control of South Vietnam and Cambodia, the press continued to take the official claims at face value. If they had bothered to look, the major media reporters would have found intense political maneuvering as well as revolutionary organizing in villages and regions listed as searched and destroyed or cleared and held.

As the war in Vietnam neared its end, some newspapers and magazines rediscovered the P.R.G., which was still called the Viet Cong, long after it was conceded that the term was deliberately prejudicial. But the politics of the P.R.G. was hardly noticed; the military effort by "Hanoi" was paramount. Thus, in the last paragraph of a very long story on page 25 of the *Boston Evening Globe* of March 31, it was reported:

"A Hanoi broadcast, monitored in Tokyo today, said the Viet Cong is ready to hold talks with a South Vietnamese government which excludes President Thieu and which abides by the Paris cease-fire to 'quickly settle all the affairs of South Vietnam.'"

At least the *Globe* mentioned the "Viet Cong" offer;

others neglected it until mid-April, when it began to dawn even on the dullards that the P.R.G. was following a carefully conceived and consistent political position that had developed organically out of the Paris Peace negotiations. But by April it was too late to help anyone understand what had been going on in Vietnam in the previous two years, or previous twenty.

[A PROGRAMMED PRESS]

It is not just a stubborn streak in the American press which made its Indochina reporting so shallow, faulty and downright wrong-headed. A complex ideological pattern conveniently blocks reality from the contemplation of correspondents and the analyses of editors. "Hanoi's Triumph" — the headline slashed across the cover of *Time* — is not just a catchy phrase, but an expression of a belief system which sees "Communism," personified as the capital of a nation, marching and marauding through innocent democracies. It leads reporters who pride themselves on their "objectivity" to see cities "fall" when they might as easily view them as "liberated," or merely as a change of administrations. Communists "nibble" and "gobble" territory (the *Boston Evening Globe*); they "split the country in half" (the *Times*). A P.R.G. assault on Bien Hoa is a "terror" attack; the "bloodbath" is elevated from fear-fantasy to certainty as the "tragedy" of Vietnam enters its final hours. This is more than florid and melodramatic phrase-mongering: it exemplifies a dogmatic bias held by writers who would quickly condemn similar prejudices in the press of countries they fear or despise.

The ideology of counter-revolution survives the mass anti-war Movement. The *Washington Post*, the *New York Times* and the *Boston Globe* all editorially joined the anti-war constituency as the war dragged on; the *Globe* was an early joiner, and in many ways was the most "liberal" major newspaper in the country during the war years. And yet as the Saigon government tottered, all three newspapers supported additional military aid to the Thieu regime. America's "commitment" and "responsibility" was invoked; it would be detrimental to national interests to abandon Saigon.

"Saigon's Desperate Hour," the *Times* headlined one of its editorials, but it seemed as if Washington were more desperate than that. The liberal media, no less than the conservative press, so closely identifies itself with imperial interests that a blow to those interests is cause for alarm. To a real opposition — one based not on ephemeral success or failure but on opposition to the imperial policy itself — there was no reason in the world to continue support to Thieu. But to those who differ with American administrations on tactics rather than ideology, a defeat for Washington is bad for business and should be avoided if possible.

When it became clear that avoidance was impossible, all three papers changed their editorial positions and — along with President Ford, it seems — focused on "humanitarian aid" to South Vietnam as a means of fulfilling the American commitments. Although the ropes were choked with rats scurrying from the foundering ship, the bias was never lost. The refugees may not have been "voting with their feet" for President Thieu, but their flight was never explain-

ed except in the most banal terms: "the real enemy is war," a *Times* correspondent said. A safe statement, but, again, not quite helpful.

The correspondents who did talk to a passing refugee or two were already programmed for the conventional answers. The best quotes would be from the Vietnamese middle class who could speak French or English, or at least express themselves in terms which American reporters understand. (Bernard Weinraub's quote-of-the-war came from a Dalat businessman who was getting out of town before the Communists came; "Did you ever see Hanoi?" he asked the *Times'* Weinraub. "Drab, drab, drab," the Vietnamese said, with distaste.) In Boston, where I followed these events — too far from the scene to feel much of a closeness with them — the only interesting commentary came from the few Vietnamese students living here and continuing their scrutiny of the situation in their homeland. But the daily papers and the local network affiliates did not think to use the Vietnamese students' material. It would have contradicted the standard theory of the refugee's heroic flight from totalitarian terror.

The press had less luck with the Babylift, but again, history will not make clear what bizarre combination of racism, sentimentality and anti-communism seized America during the week the orphans rained on San Francisco. After a while, the ambiguities of the situation — to say the least — began to negate the enthusiasm with which the press originally greeted the operation; but the Left critics were always made to seem more cranky than they deserved to be, more misanthropic than their political instincts warranted.

All in all, it was as chaotic in the cable rooms of the American newspapers as it must have been on Highway 1 in South Vietnam. Rumors were dignified as stories and enshrined as unimpeachable fact, and never heard from again after the first day of release. Weinraub, for instance, told of communists firing on columns of refugees, and the network news picked it up; the story was never confirmed, but the impression of terror remained. The *Times* was still quoting anonymous "well-informed sources," "reliable Western sources," and "well-placed sources" in March, when those sources were clearly lying through their teeth. On the rare occasions the networks showed films of life in the "fallen" provinces, the pictures were underlined, and undermined, with captions warning in effect that their provenance — North Vietnam — probably invalidated them. No monitory captions alerting viewers to "South Vietnamese Films" were ever used, despite the years of unreliable material from the allied side. By now it should be obvious that when the press congratulates itself on the lessons it has learned — and taught all of us — in Vietnam, it must not be taken seriously.

[THE ELUSIVE TRUTH]

What would it be like if the press really did learn a thing or two from its long experience in Vietnam? Of course the question is academic, because the obstacles to understanding are so deeply rooted in the American psyche, that it would take something of a revolution in consciousness to remove

them. But it is possible to identify some of those aspects which elude the reporter's eye and escape the editor's pencil, that might make all the difference in the way Americans see the world.

First, the press should have learned that revolution is not the same as civil war, and not at all equivalent to imperial invasion. Vietnam is a country in the throes of a long revolution, distorted and extended by successive forays of colonial invaders, but never losing its original character as developed by Ho Chi Minh and his compatriots half a century ago. Liberal journalists who liked the notion of "civil war" understood that character no better than hard-liners who insisted on the "invasion from the North" theory. It is no accident, as they say in Ho Chi Minh City, that the bulk of the Vietnamese refugees who made it to the United States are from the middle and upper classes which the United States came to Vietnam to "protect." Class warfare, of course, does not roll trippingly off the typewriter of any American correspondent, and if it did, it would be greeted with uncomprehending stares back at the home office. But not to know that the Vietnamese war was at least partly a war of Vietnamese classes is to be in an intellectual quagmire from which there is no rescue.

Second, the press should have learned that America's racial and cultural chauvinism ill-equips Americans to spend much time abroad, on missions of good will or military assistance. Vietnamese nationalism is an essential ingredient of the Vietnamese revolution; even America's puppets resented the way the soldiers and diplomats sent out from Washington bullied ally and enemy alike, debased the quality of Vietnamese life, corrupted an entire population and squandered billions recreating the empty pleasures of the slums and suburbs of America over there. From kill-ratios to the orphan evacuation, a current of unexamined racism courses through what President Ford now calls the American experience in Vietnam. "Life is cheap in the Orient," General Westmoreland said. That is, it is cheap in the eyes of Americans, which is a good enough reason in itself for staying out.

Finally, the press should have learned — and might still learn — that war and world politics are not board games, despite the popularity of Diplomacy and the like. There are still daily stories speculating on the relative tilt of Hanoi to Peking or Moscow. But Hanoi-watching and related pastimes are utterly useless in deciphering the conduct of international conflict and revolutions in this day and age. That, of course, is what Henry Kissinger was all about, and his failure is not occasioned simply by the defeat of a specific policy. Rather, the end of America's presence in Indochina is a defeat for the concept of Kissinger's policy — the personal manipulation of diplomatic options without regard to the urgent needs of the people affected by them. Kissinger has failed in the Middle East because he trivializes the Palestinian struggle. He failed in Indochina because he pretended he could parlay a spirit of camaraderie with Le Duc Th. into a permanent presidency for Nguyen Van Thieu. It may even be true that the diplomats of Russia and China encouraged him in that pretense. If so, they all were wrong. The spirit of the people is not only greater than the Man's technology; it is greater than His diplomacy, too.