



Our Options in Vietnam

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WITH THE FALL of Dienbienphu on May 7, 1954, the first western attempt to save Laos and the northern provinces of Vietnam from Communist-led revolutionary warfare came to an end. Today the same conditions that impelled the French to make the bitter choice between broadening the scope of the war or cutting their losses face the United States and the South Vietnamese government we are committed to support. And once again the choices must be evaluated primarily on the basis of available military facts and figures.

The situation in South Vietnam today is militarily serious but by no means desperate, if you look only at the numerical balance sheets. On the South Vietnamese side, there are forces of some 530,000 men that include the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN, known among the Americans as "the Arvins"), probably the best-equipped army of its size in the non-Communist world; a militarized Civil Guard; local militiamen grouped in the Self-Defense Corps (SDC); and various police and special units. In addition, there are at least 15,500 American military "advisers."

THE COMMUNIST insurgent forces, or Vietcong as they are called by the South Vietnamese, are both smaller in number and far poorer in

terms of equipment. There are three types of combat units: a hard-core body known as Chu-Luc (Main Force), regional units, and the local militia. The hard-core units, used for all major attacks against the ARVN, are composed of those veterans of the war against the French who stayed in South Vietnam after 1954 or who went north for additional training and later reinfiltated southward. Some Chu-Luc units operate as regiments of about 2,500 men, but most are in 500-man mobile battalions that may be shifted from province to province or even from region to region—from the mountain plateau area to the Mekong Delta, for example, as happened throughout 1963.

The regional units operate in company strength within a given province that they know well. They carry out small combat missions of their own, such as ambushes or sabotage; but their key mission is to serve as "protective coloration" when a hard-core unit arrives in their area. One or several companies of the regional units join the Chu-Luc for the duration of its operation in the province and thus provide the larger unit with local eyes and ears, food or medical supplies requisitioned on the spot, and also with fairly well-trained replacements. When the hard-core unit strikes, the local militia levies come into their own.

They act as guides and lookouts for the regulars and regionals. It is the local levies that give the Vietcong units their frightening ability to be at home almost everywhere. If the attack succeeds, the local Vietcong militiamen will "clean up" the battlefield, hide the booty, bury the dead of their own side, and care for its wounded before the ARVN can take an accurate count of enemy losses. And if, by rare chance, the regular Vietcong unit falls into a trap, the militia are expected to bear the brunt of the rear-guard fighting until the regulars have again disappeared into the jungle or into the impenetrable maze of canals and swamps. The elite of the militia eventually "graduate" into the regional units. Much later, after years of fighting and political indoctrination, the onetime peasant may become a hard-bitten Chu-Luc—if he lives that long.

Intelligence estimates of the exact number of Vietcong operating in South Vietnam have hardly varied over the past four years. A figure of between 22,000 to 25,000 regulars is generally admitted, supplemented by perhaps 60,000 to 80,000 irregulars. These figures are the basis for the optimism displayed by senior American officers both in Saigon and in the Pentagon. During the Indochina war, the French were fighting at a "tie-down ratio" of 1.5 to 1, which is

notoriously insufficient to win against guerrillas. In South Vietnam today, the proportions are 16 to 1 if one counts the hard-core Vietcong only, and still 5 to 1 in favor of the ARVN when one includes all the Communist guerrillas.

The Numbers Game

For Secretary McNamara and his entourage, the slide rule and the computer are articles of faith in measuring "success" or "failure." In Vietnam, that familiar military yardstick, the front line, is disconcertingly absent. In Korea, when the U.S. forces were compressed into the Pusan perimeter, there were no possible pretexts for optimistic headlines; after two years of military stalemate, the need for some sort of political accommodation became obvious. In Vietnam, success or failure must be measured by far more controversial standards. There is, first of all, the "kill count" or "body count," i.e., the number of enemy bodies actually counted on the battlefield. The trouble with the body count is that the Vietcong have the habit of picking up their casualties, dead or wounded, under all but the direst of circumstances—precisely to prevent an accurate estimate of how badly they have been hurt. Often many of the dead, particularly those killed by strafing or bombing, are innocent civilians. Their numbers inflate the kill counts of Pentagon briefers but in no way affect the Vietcong combat potential. The kill count, though discredited, is being used religiously to this day. The official (and largely meaningless) estimate of Vietcong killed from mid-1957 up to January, 1964, is about 125,000.

Another standard of measurement, and one that is perhaps slightly more representative of the real situation, is the "incident count," that is, the number of hostile acts in a given month. Incidents are classified into four categories: armed attacks, terrorism, sabotage, and propaganda; and the shift of emphasis from one category to the other is in itself considered significant. Where the incident count proves itself unreliable is in lumping together the isolated shooting of a village guard and the battalion-size attack against a whole government garrison. Very often, a numerical decrease of Vietcong ac-

tivities is more than compensated by the fact that each individual action is far larger than in previous weeks, or that the enemy places emphasis on more violent incidents: for example, of the 738 incidents reported for the week of February 7-14, 1964, close to seventy per cent involved acts of terrorism. In any event, judging by the British experience in Malaya, where a total incident count of thirty a month was considered the equivalent of "victory," South Vietnam still has a long way to go.

AIR OPERATIONS have two yardsticks of success. One is called the "structure count," and the other is simply the tonnage of bombs or the amount of cannon or machine-gun ammunition expended. The structure count records the number of houses destroyed by bombing or napalm. Any house designated by the Forward Air Controller as a target automatically becomes a Vietcong house and any village burned to the ground a Vietcong village, regardless of actual political allegiance.

Finally, there are such conventional criteria as the number of weapons lost by either side. Here again, the record shows that South Vietnamese commanders, for fear of



loss of face or reprimand, have tended to understate their own losses and overstate those of the Vietcong. This has become a great deal less likely now that American advisers can be found even at the lowest unit levels. How disastrously bad the situation was in past years can only be guessed at—one educated guess is 125,000 light weapons lost to the Vietcong in the past two years—but the Pentagon officially admitted a loss rate of 234 weapons a week for the

last three months of 1963, or more than 12,000 weapons for the year, as against average weekly Vietcong losses of ninety-seven weapons. The terms of comparison are relatively meaningless: "our" Vietnamese lose brand-new supermodern American weapons and the Vietcong lose homemade zip guns, although in recent months the ARVN have been recapturing American weapons. The huge amount of U.S. weapons available to the Vietcong through capture, theft, or even sale reduces the importance of the Ho Chi Minh Trail as a supply line from North Vietnam. It was important much earlier in the insurrection when organized units came south to become the nucleus of the hard-core battalions. Now the insurgency has reached the point where to a large extent it feeds on the enemy, in true Mao Tse-tung fashion. The trail, however, can still be useful for funneling in special replacements (saboteurs, anti-aircraft gunners, political cadres) and will be difficult to cut altogether.

Four Roads to Choose

As this picture of the military aspects of the South Vietnamese war unfolds, it becomes abundantly clear that in a war without fronts and without hard-and-fast criteria of success, victory in the accepted sense of the word, or even in accordance with some new counterinsurgency abstraction such as "effective control" of ninety per cent of the population, becomes an elusive target. This realization, which has belatedly come to Washington, has finally brought pressure on the administration for a re-examination of the various possibilities (the official term is "options") to resolve the Vietnamese conflict. Added to this pressure is a desire to do something to prevent the situation from becoming a political liability for the Democrats in November.

In brief, the four major options can be defined as follows:

(1) Let South Vietnam go down the drain by pulling American troops out at a given date, regardless of the situation on the ground.

(2) Continue the present type of "proxy war" for as long as another ten years if necessary, and try to win under the present ground rules, with perhaps both a larger South

Vietnamese and American commitment. At the moment, this seems to be the official administration line.

(3) "Conventionalize" the war by escalating it from a counter guerrilla operation in South Vietnam to full-size combat operations against North Vietnam and, if necessary eventually, Red China. This is the new "hard" line advocated by less cautious officials in Washington.

(4) Negotiate with the enemy—not from the present position of weakness but from a position of strength created out of a sober-minded appraisal of Communist weaknesses and western strength in the Far East as a whole. This alternative is often conveniently confused with the first option by those who fear that any settlement whatsoever would mean neutralization, followed by a Communist takeover.

IRONICALLY, the Communist planners in North Vietnam seem to agree on the alternatives. They were described to the North Vietnamese higher cadres in the January, 1964, issue of *Hoc Tap* ("Studies"), the North Vietnamese Communist Party's theoretical monthly, as follows:

"(1) The United States must withdraw from South Vietnam and let the South Vietnamese people settle their affairs by themselves.

"(2) The United States will introduce into South Vietnam hundreds of thousands of more troops and large quantities of arms, and apply new techniques to carry on the war for some more years.

"(3) The United States will broaden its present special war [i.e., counterinsurgency operations], and invade North Vietnam in an attempt to win victory in South Vietnam."

Needless to say, Hanoi has no reason to publicize the fourth option, which from its standpoint is the least desirable course for the United States to adopt; and for entirely different reasons, Washington seems to agree with Hanoi.

Of the four U.S. options, the first two are temptingly the simplest and may well be advocated by the same people at different times. It would appear that the first one was implied in McNamara's testimony released by the House Armed Services Committee on February 18, in which he

reiterated his intention to pull out the bulk of the American advisers stationed in Vietnam by 1965 because "I don't believe that we as a nation should assume the primary responsibility for the war in South Vietnam. It is a counter guerrilla war, it is a war that can only be won by the Vietnamese themselves."

The text is not clear on whether 1965 is still considered a decisive cutoff date. But, presumably, if it is obvious by then that the South Vietnamese are not pulling their own weight militarily and politically, the



United States would simply get out of the war by refusing to increase its commitments while at the same time refusing to have any part of a negotiated settlement. That solution, it should be remembered, was in effect the course followed by the Eisenhower administration at the end of the French-Indochinese war in 1954. When it became obvious that the French would not or could not win the war as the Dienbienphu disaster took shape, Eisenhower, with the support of General Matthew Ridgway, then Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, prevailed over the counsel of Vice-President Nixon and Admiral Radford, who advocated the use of American troops to save the French in Indo-China. And the late Secretary of State John Foster Dulles at the ensuing Geneva conference of April-July, 1954, steadfastly refused to sign "any treaty that makes anybody a slave."

In short, by refusing to accept a full measure of participation in the Geneva negotiations in 1954, the

United States lost the opportunity to help shape the terms of the settlement and to use its power effectively in implementing the pact. Such an abdication of responsibility is of course unthinkable in 1964.

Will We 'Escalate'?

The second option—winning the war under present ground rules—would entail, on the basis of experience in other such wars, either doubling the number of South Vietnamese men under arms to one million or putting in two or three American army corps (about 200,000 men, with all attached services). In either case, civilian counterinsurgency programs would also have to be increased by substantial financial aid. These troop figures are not pulled out of thin air. As has been shown, the present ratio of friendly vs. hostile fighters is 5 to 1. Experience from Malaya to Algeria to Cyprus has shown that in order to break even (let alone win) militarily, a ratio of at least 15 to 1 is required. As for the use of American fighting troops in constituted units rather than as isolated "advisers," it would probably give the South Vietnamese Army the same lift in morale it gave the South Korean troops in 1950. The argument that the presence of American field troops would give substance to Communist charges of American imperialism can be considered baseless—the Communists are using the argument anyhow, and even the popular French magazine *Paris-Match* recently termed that argument a "convention whose hypocrisy is only matched by its absurdity."

There remains the problem of feasibility. To double the number of armed Vietnamese would mean to boost American expenditures in Vietnam far over a billion dollars a year. It would also entail sending far more American advisers to the area. As for the alternative step of sending, say, six U.S. divisions to Vietnam, that would almost deplete the whole American strategic reserve, unless the draft is radically increased. What all this would do in terms of increased budget expenditures, the dollar gap, and mounting casualty lists can easily be guessed at. And, as the French demonstrated in Algeria or the British in Cyprus and Palestine, there is no ironclad guar-

antee of victory even through the massive military approach.

To “ESCALATE” the Vietnamese war into a Korea-type operation extending into the North Vietnamese sanctuary, as outlined in Option No. 3, would combine the expenses of the second option with the tempting possibility of much quicker and greater rewards. North Vietnam is no longer the guerrilla country the French knew. Ho Chi Minh’s régime now controls cities, builds industries and irrigation systems, runs railroads and airlines—all through the toil and sweat of the Vietnamese themselves over the past decade and the fairly large amounts of Soviet-bloc economic aid. All this provides very vulnerable conventional targets for American airpower. The rulers in Hanoi are fully aware of this and are obviously worried about it. I recall seeing unmuzzled anti-aircraft guns pointing skyward near industrial installations north of Hanoi in 1962; and Georges Chaffard, a reporter of *Le Monde*, recently noted similar anti-aircraft installations near the coastal city of Haiphong.

“We must be vigilant,” said his North Vietnamese guide to him. “We’re not at peace yet. The American aggressors fight against our brothers in the South and may well attack us here.”

It is a matter of debate whether such an attack on the North Vietnamese heartland, the Red River Delta, would yield the desired dividends in terms of South Vietnamese pacification. As has been shown before, the Vietcong in South Vietnam do not depend to a very great extent upon North Vietnamese supplies and even less upon North Vietnamese manpower. If we expand the war to North Vietnam, we simply return to the French situation before 1954—assuming that Red China would not join the fray and expand the war even further. Furthermore, it is military idiocy to believe that the South Vietnamese Army, which cannot even hold on to major communication lines fifteen miles outside Saigon, could provide the backbone for a northern invasion. As in the case of Korea, where there also was an initial attempt to limit the American commitment to naval and air support, large American ground units would

have to be thrown into the battle.

Such considerations doubtless explain the urgent attention Washington is now giving to the less risky proposition of mounting major guerrilla operations across the border against North Vietnam. This would not represent a wholly new departure. South Vietnamese saboteurs have been parachuted periodically into North Vietnam from U.S. aircraft, at least one of which was shot



down. But the North Vietnamese régime is quite familiar with this kind of warfare, and with its pervasive police-state system has thus far succeeded in capturing most parachuted or infiltrated agents. There is an iron rule in the counterinfiltration business: it's pretty hard to do if one's own bases are penetrated—and in South Vietnam today hardly an airplane can take off without being immediately spotted by pro-Communist elements.

In short, a guerrilla operation in the north, designed to dry up the Ho Chi Minh Trail, has little likelihood of making a dent in operations in the Mekong Delta in time to be useful. But it would, in turn, give the Hanoi régime a good pretext for opening the floodgates for large-scale infiltration of the south, thus far kept in check by the almost but not quite dead International Control Commission left over from the 1954 Geneva cease-fire. And this, too, would return us to the French situation of a generalized war.

Ho's 'Straight Zigzag Line'

Yet, carrying the war to North Vietnam in some form cannot be ruled out as a logical possibility. The North Vietnamese themselves, as evidenced in the previously cited *Hoc Tap* article, consider such a situation a distinct possibility, up to and including the use of nuclear weapons by the United States.

In fact, much has been made in recent weeks about statements from

Hanoi that apparently reject almost any kind of peaceable solution except on its own terms, thus justifying the position of the bitter-enders in the United States who see salvation only in Option 2 or 3. Another interpretation of the *Hoc Tap* articles is that Ho Chi Minh's régime now has definitively thrown in its lot with Peking and is willing to pursue the war against South Vietnam no matter how great the risk.

A careful reading of the whole article and subsequent comments from Hanoi, Peking, and Moscow makes this far from crystal clear. The North Vietnamese prose is just as obscure as ever. For example, extracts rebroadcast by Peking contain the following passage:

“Taking strategic offense against the enemy does not mean pursuance of an adventurist policy by the socialist camp to eliminate imperialism by means of a world war, nor the start of armed uprisings and revolutionary wars to eliminate imperialism by the people of capitalist countries before a situation favorable to imminent revolution has emerged.”

And in the next paragraph, the Hanoi text speaks of making “strategic attacks on the enemy politically” rather than through outright military operations. To be sure, the text pays obeisance to the Peking line condemning co-operation with “U.S. imperialism” as an “illusion,” but another key text published on January 21 in the Vietnamese Communist Party's official newspaper *Nhan Dan* (“Humanity”) also condemns “dogmatism and sectarianism,” which are the sins Moscow accuses Peking of. In other words, Hanoi may well prefer to pursue what a knowledgeable British diplomat once called a “straight zigzag line” between its Communist masters. As for the struggle of the Vietcong guerrillas in South Vietnam, *Hoc Tap* warned that their war

would be "long, hard, *self-supporting* [my italics], but . . . certainly victorious." To be sure, all the Communist powers have stressed the point that any attack against North Vietnam might bring Red China, and possibly the Soviet Union, into the fight, but that is neither new nor particularly revealing. In simple terms, Hanoi does not now seem keenly interested in escalating the war in South Vietnam to the point where it would have to provide the real estate for a slugging match between Red China and the United States; the more so as the Vietcong in South Vietnam seem to be doing reasonably well on a "self-supporting" basis.

Room to Maneuver?

All this leaves ample room for maneuver around the fourth option: negotiating a settlement from a position of strength. Over the last few years Hanoi has substantially lowered its sights: where it once insisted on early reunification as its minimum goal, it is now prepared to acknowledge the temporary existence of two Vietnams as separate states with "separate social systems." In fact, some French observers, notably Chaffard, assert that there is even a difference of view on the subject between Hanoi and the Vietcong civilian arm, the Southern Liberation Front, with the latter apparently willing to be even more accommodating to the West. This perhaps explains the unequivocal admission made by Mme. Ngo Dinh Nhu to the right-wing Paris weekly *Candide* of February 13 that her husband had indeed been negotiating with the Communists—but not via the French and not with Hanoi, but with the Liberation Front on the spot. His motive was "to seek ways to bring them back into the fold," says Mme. Nhu, but in all likelihood Nhu had concluded that a coalition government was the only way out of the military cul-de-sac.

It is also noteworthy that Hanoi recently disinterred the long-dead Geneva Agreement and asked for its "correct implementation" as a means of settling the "South Vietnam issue." The suggestion is disingenuous on the face of it. The application of an agreement that the United States never signed scarcely

offers an acceptable solution to the present problem, and preaching from Hanoi about "correct implementation" would seem to exceed even Communist standards of cynicism. Nevertheless, the suggestion opens up interesting possibilities. For the Geneva Agreement, it will be recalled, allowed the presence of over six hundred American advisers, the number there at the time of the cease-fire. It also provided for two Vietnamese zones that would not be tied to any power bloc. All this suggests that Hanoi has not entirely made up its mind as to what it wants, or how to go about getting it without a major war.

Another area for maneuver favorable to the West centers on Red China's present weaknesses, both economic and military. The Chinese have had to get along for quite a while without Soviet spare parts and maintenance help. To supply, say, twenty Chinese divisions southward across Yunnan's chaotic terrain would by no means be as easy as it was to supply Chinese People's Volunteers in Korea from the excellent Manchurian rail and road net and

Vietnam would simply face Saigon with more of the same, a "counter-escalation" by the United States of the war into North Vietnam, even if confined to one single saturation raid, could destroy the fruits of eight years' fighting against the French and ten years' backbreaking labor since 1954. To be sure, Chinese planes might appear in North Vietnamese skies the next day, but that would be small consolation to North Vietnamese leaders surrounded by devastation. In short, Hanoi cannot really afford a total "victory" in South Vietnam if the price is the destruction of its own economic base, for that would bring about total dependence on Red China. Furthermore, every new Communist military success along the Mekong may speed the day of both American and Chinese intervention in North Vietnam. This is a paradox that Hanoi will find hard to escape, unless it is willing to accept far less than its present demands.

The United States has yet another trump: whether to push Hanoi into Peking's hands or allow it to retain or even improve its present "straight



from nearby Soviet supply depots. Finally, there is the handicap of two thousand years of Vietnamese distrust of the Chinese. The North Vietnamese in particular still recall with a shudder their VJ-Day "liberation" by the Yunnanese hordes.

THE UNITED STATES has other valuable cards to play. For one, South Vietnam has the surplus rice Hanoi needs. For another, while a major guerrilla offensive from North

zigzag line" is largely an American decision to make. A normalization of trade relations between the two Vietnams—bringing southern foodstuffs and rubber northward and northern minerals and manufactured goods southward—would allow Hanoi to depend less on China and to adopt a policy of national self-determination within the Communist bloc. That Moscow cannot do, but Washington can.

When all is said and done, the real

American deterrent to Chinese military intervention in Vietnam is not the 15,000-odd American advisers wading around in the jungles of South Vietnam in search of an elusive enemy (only two hundred out of a total of 3,450 weekly operations in South Vietnam make any enemy contact at all) but the U.S. Seventh Fleet with its aircraft carriers. That force can be brought to bear on the Vietnamese situation at any time as long as even a small American "tripwire" exists in South Vietnam. That deterrent has worked effectively on the Chinese at Quemoy and Taiwan. There is no reason to believe that it could not be used effectively in a Vietnamese settlement.

What special advantages might accrue from this fourth option? First, it would buy time for South Vietnam to establish at least some sort of durable political structure and to strengthen an economy ravaged by more than a decade of civil war. This sort of reconstruction, impossible under Option 2 or 3, offers the only sound defense against the inroads of Communist subversion, which can be expected to remain a major threat to the country for years to come. Second, a settlement based not on an abdication of our responsibility but on a determined application of our power and influence in the area would permit the West to increase North Vietnamese independence of Red China in exchange for an end to the guerrilla warfare, thus barring Red China from its most convenient avenue of domination of Southeast Asia. And third, it would disengage the United States from a secondary theatre of conflict that now absorbs an ever-increasing share of our resources and attention, but would not weaken our ability to save South Vietnam from outside subversion. Force could always be brought to bear on short notice should North Vietnam violate the terms of the settlement and challenge the U.S. guarantees that would necessarily underwrite it.

There must be negotiation and settlement sooner or later, unless the Johnson administration wishes to leave the Vietnamese war in what has been called the shadowland between unattainable victory and unacceptable surrender.



Chou En-lai and the Watusi

CLAIRE STERLING

USUMBURA, BURUNDI
FOR A BRIEF MOMENT last month, the obscure little African kingdom of Burundi suddenly attracted world attention. It got no more than a glance, since what interested the international press was not so much the panic-stricken Watusi refugees fleeing into Burundi as the slaughter of ten or twenty thousand other Watusi tribesmen in the adjoining state of Rwanda. That episode having been noted and deplored, Burundi has dropped back into an oblivion it doesn't quite deserve.

Certainly Burundi hasn't many claims to distinction. Never much of a prize in colonial days—the Belgians got little out of it and put correspondingly little into it—this former Trust Territory attained nationhood in 1962 with no towns except the capital at Usumbura, no newspapers, no more than 750 miles of paved road (for an area of eleven thousand square miles), no resources, and no cash crops other than a few thousand tons of coffee and cotton. The principal support for its 2.5 million inhabitants was a yearly \$4-million subsidy grudgingly provided by Belgium. Nevertheless, Burundi is apparently about to acquire a future. In its search for a frugal way to penetrate Africa, China has been looking for fledgling states that might be bought or rented cheaply: small, helplessly indigent, politically inchoate, and strategically placed. Zanzibar, twenty miles off the East African coast, was first on the list. Burundi, wedged between East Afri-

ca and the huge, stormy former Belgian Congo, appears to be next.

On the face of it, Rwanda might seem a more likely arena for the exercise of Chinese influence. Burundi, after all, is not only a monarchy; its reigning monarch, the Mwami Mwambutsa IV, comes from a race of aristocrats, the Watusi, surely the most haughty and elegant people in Africa—who had held the more backward Bahutu of both Rwanda and Burundi in hereditary bonded serfdom for five hundred years. But in Rwanda the Watusi were overthrown by a bloody revolution in 1959, their Mwami, Kigeri V, has been exiled, and the underdog Bahutu are at last on top. As it happens, however, the Bahutu of Rwanda are on the best of terms with their former Belgian rulers, the Catholic Church, and the West in general, and have written a strong anti-Communist clause into their constitution. On the other hand, the royalist Watusi are incorrigible leftists. Their parties—the Unar in Rwanda, the Uprona in Burundi—are ultranationalist, neutralist, anti-Belgian, anti-Catholic, anti-western, and shot through with Communist infiltrators; the exiled Mwami Kigeri has long been on Peking's pension list; and the Mwami Mwambutsa's followers in Burundi have been intimately friendly with such impeccable African anti-colonialists as Nkrumah, Ben Bella, Nasser, and the late Patrice Lumumba.

It is not so surprising, therefore, that China should have considered