

REPORT FROM WASHINGTON
By Congressman Joe Skubitz

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Vietnam, an S-shaped strip of rich coastal, mountain and delta lands smaller in total land area than our State of California, lies half-way round the world from Kansas. It is a divided country of some 31½ million people, bounded on the north by Communist China, on the west by Communist-controlled Laos and left-leaning Cambodia, on the east and south by the South China Sea. Since 1960, more than three hundred American servicemen have been killed in action there. Why? What are we doing in Vietnam?

This is an attempt to explain the U.S. involvement in Vietnam and to answer some of the questions you have been writing to me.

French Indochina

Vietnam comprises the former French protectorates of Tonkin and Annam and the former colony of Cochin China. Together with Cambodia and Laos, the three states make up the area known as Indochina. From mid-19th to mid-20th century, the area was controlled by France, except for a brief period during World War II when interventionist forces from Japan temporarily ousted the French from Vietnam.

France had announced plans for a federation of Indochina before the end of the war, with greater self-government for the various states. But although the federation was accepted in Cambodia and Laos, the Annamese nationalists demanded the complete independence of Annam, Tonkin and Cochin China as "Vietnam."

France recognized Annam and Tonkin in March 1946 as the free state of Vietnam within the federation of Indochina but refused to permit the accession of Cochin China to the new state. The Viet Minh party (the League for the Independence of Vietnam, a coalition of nationalist and Communist groups) had set up a republic with its capital at Hanoi at war's end. Now, in December 1946, fighting between French troops and the regime headed by Ho Chi Minh of the north ushered in the start of a prolonged guerrilla war.

U.S. Aid Begins

In 1949, France recognized Cochin China as a part of the new country and installed Bao Dai, former emperor of Annam, as ruler of Vietnam. Bao Dai's regime was promised a large measure of autonomy in domestic affairs, but defense and foreign relations were to be kept in French hands.

On February 7, 1950, the U.S. and Great Britain accorded diplomatic recognition to the Government of the State of Vietnam, the Kingdom of Laos, and the Kingdom of Cambodia (the "Associated States of Indochina").

That same year, Chinese Communist forces having reached the northern border of Indochina, thereby increasing the chance of effective Soviet and Chinese aid to the Viet Minh forces (who held most of the country outside the thickly settled areas), the U.S. signed a Mutual Defense Assistance Agreement with France, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos for indirect U.S. military aid to Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

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The following year, the U.S. signed an agreement with Vietnam for direct economic assistance.

The Fall of Dien Bien Phu

In 1953, the struggle to prevent the area of Southeast Asia from being engulfed by international Communism had grown increasingly difficult and bitter. Further U.S. financial assistance was given to France for its prosecution of the war against the Viet Minh.

But on May 7, 1954, a climax was reached. The Communist guerrillas had tried several times to drive the French out of the northern provinces; now, in a classic third-phase operation,¹ victory was theirs with the defeat of French troops at Dien Bien Phu.

The 1954 Geneva Accords

The fall of Dien Bien Phu² led France to submit armistice proposals to the conference which was convened in Geneva in 1954 to discuss Korea and "peace in Indochina." Delegates to the Conference were from Great Britain and the U.S.S.R., (joint chairmen), France, the United States, Communist China, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and the Viet Minh regime.

The "Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam," signed on July 20, 1954, by representatives of France and the Viet Minh, established a truce line at the 17th parallel, splitting the country into two nearly equal halves. The Communists were to withdraw to the north, and the non-Communists and French to the south. Both sides were to order and enforce a complete end to hostilities, and neither zone was to be used as a military base to resume hostilities or further an aggressive policy. An International Control Commission (ICC) was created to supervise the truce.³

The United States, though not a signatory to the agreement, declared on July 21 that it would refrain from the threat or use of force to disturb it and would view any renewal of aggression "with grave concern and as seriously threatening international peace and security."

In August, the flow of almost one million refugees from North to South Vietnam began, and on October 11, the Communist Viet Minh regime formally took over control of Hanoi and North Vietnam.

U.S. Aid Increases

As 1955 opened, with North Vietnam showing no evidence of any honest intention to abide by the agreements reached at Geneva, the U.S. promised to render direct assistance to South Vietnam and established the U.S. Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) to take over the training of the South Vietnamese Army following the relinquishing of command authority by the French.

On February 5, Premier Diem had decreed the first of a series of laws initiating an extensive land reform program. On March 7, the U.S. signed an agreement supplementing the existing economic cooperation agreement of September 1951.

Current Figures

In 1965, U.S. military personnel stationed in South Vietnam has increased to over 24,000 and still rising. Additionally, we are pumping some \$2 million a day in economic aid into the country.

What Kind of War Is It?

It is a war of nerves, propaganda, subversion, sabotage, assassination, kidnapping, torture--a war, as former Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge characterized it, "with no front, no rear, and no flanks." In short, a guerrilla war.

Since the beginning of Communist infiltration into South Vietnam, the Viet Cong have murdered an estimated 16,000 village chiefs. The Communists don't win any friends by this tactic, but they do influence people. And it must be remembered that some 85% of the people of South Vietnam live in the countryside.

The problems posed for the defending army in this kind of operation are hellish. First, there is the general absence of a feeling by the people out in the countryside of close kinship with the Saigon Government (not to mention the frustration of trying to maintain a half-way stable national government in Saigon).

Second, there is the difficult nature of the terrain, much of it an almost impenetrable jungle full of tigers, snakes and undergrowth--perfect terrain for guerrilla operations.

Third, there is the problem already alluded to of entire villages being terrorized into aiding the Viet Cong. The Government Army can send in a whole battalion of infantry to "clear" an area, and after weeks or even months find that the VC have simply either melted back into the jungle or taken temporary refuge in the homes of the citizens to re-emerge and strike again when the infantry pulls out.

Guerrilla Warfare

Let us understand the two types of guerrilla war: the first is born of rebellion from within, an "uprising," as in the early stages of our own American Revolution, and in Castro's revolution against Batista. The Mau Mau uprising in Kenya and the Algerian revolution also fall into this category.

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The second type is instigated from without and/or derives its chief support from another country (usually but not necessarily a contiguous country). In the case of the Communists, there is clearly aggressive intent, although they prefer to stylize their greedy designs as being "wars of national liberation."

The Vietnam war is of this second type, and many factors serve to make it an ideal place for guerrilla warfare.

--Vietnam is a rich food-producing country, so that the guerrilla can live off the land. This is vital.

--The terrain, as we have noted, is such that pursuit is frustratingly difficult, which gives the guerrilla his necessary mobility and secrecy. This is very important.

--As most of the people of South Vietnam live in the countryside, the Communists by their terrorist tactics can exact intelligence and food-stuffs from the local population. This is significant.

--Further, because the war in South Vietnam is being directed and supported from outside--and the State Department's recently-issued "White Paper" presents demonstrable evidence to prove that this is indeed the case--the guerrilla maintains his "invulnerable" base of operations in North Vietnam and supply routes such as the Ho Chi Minh Trail in neighboring Laos. This is crucial.

Communist Strategy

As Charles Thayer points out in his book, *GUERRILLA* (see footnotes), "the ultimate object of every war is the political aim for which it was undertaken; the means to the end is the destruction of the enemy's army."

In the case of guerrilla warfare, the basic strategy is to wear the other side out by long exertion.

That this is the Communist strategy in Vietnam seems hardly arguable: the war has followed Mao Tse-tung's classic pattern of guerrilla warfare. It's a cheap war for the Communists; indeed, the only realistic kind of armed conflict they can presently afford to push in Southeast Asia.

Looking beyond Hanoi, Red China's air force is largely obsolescent, her naval power scarcely a threat compared with that of the Free World deployed in the area around Southeast Asia. Nor can her economy presently support a great air force and superior navy.

What Red China does have, however, is a massive ground army of two and a half million troops, backed by a militia estimated at twelve million. Clearly, given the monolithic structure of her government and the political control she exerts over her subjects, Communist China in sheer human resources could afford to back North Vietnam in a long and exhaustive guerrilla campaign against South Vietnam, with a greedy eye to the eventual domination of all Southeast Asia.

And while guerrilla warfare is not new (Thayer notes that the first guerrilla war on record was fought in China two thousand years before Marx), what is new is the danger of "escalation" in an age of devastating nuclear capability. In this context, assuming the motive stated above, time is on Red China's side. Although she has exploded a primitive atomic device (Western intelligence nevertheless seemed surprised to discover that it was triggered by an advanced methods and that U-235 rather than the more common plutonium was used), it will be some years, in the opinion of most military experts, before she can develop a meaningful delivery system. In the meanwhile, continued guerrilla fighting, if it doesn't wear the other side out, will at least buy time.

These factors, and others, serve to illustrate the tremendous problems faced in combatting guerrilla warfare. Conventional strategy, "war by the book," is impossible. Even by unconventional (counterinsurgency) methods, the ratio of troops is very high. It has been estimated that the ratio of counter-insurgents to guerrillas when the British mopped up the Communists in Malaya was 25 to one--and in that operation, the British did not have to contend with significant help being supplied to the guerrillas from outside, nor was the terrain as ideal for guerrilla fighting in Malaya as it is in Vietnam. Further, by rounding up the Chinese settlers who had been aiding the Communists and placing them in guarded camps, the British deprived the guerrillas of vital intelligence and food sources.

What Are the Options for the U.S.?

We could, of course, pull out; quit our efforts there and "bring the boys home." Those who advocate this policy point out that the U.S. has never had any legal sanction to bolster its presence in Vietnam, anyway.

While it is true that the American presence in Vietnam is not under the aegis of the United Nations, SEATO, or any international body but is rather a relationship between the U.S. Government and the Government of South Vietnam, it is equally certain that the Communists would like nothing better than for the U.S. to pick up its marbles and go home. Every indicator points to an almost immediate take-over by the Communists the minute that happened. The Administration appears to have rejected this option out of hand.

At the other extreme, we could launch a "preventive" war against the Communists. Advocates of this policy suggest that if an all-out clash between the U.S. and Red China is inevitable (a questionable assumption), we might as well get it over with now, while China is still in the rudimentary stages of atomic warfare development. Further, some of them argue, we are fighting a losing cause on the ground because history shows that guerrilla wars are always ultimately successful.

This policy raises more questions than it answers. First, it ignores the interests of Communist Russia, which does have nuclear delivery capability. Whether the Soviet Union is prepared to take the big risk in

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defending her interests in Southeast Asia is open to question; certainly it is beyond the layman's ability to assess.

Second, the thought of launching a "preventive" war, however justifiable such a measure might be made to seem, would probably go so strongly against the grain of the majority of the American people as to be a moot option.

Third, the statement that guerrilla wars are always ultimately successful is in error. As previously noted, the British managed to conquer the guerrillas in Malaya. Ramon Magsaysay, one of the most successful counterinsurgent leaders of all time, put down the Huk rebellion in the Philippines. In Greece and Cyprus, guerrillas have been driven back. So while the operation is always a costly one in human and material resources and sometimes in political concessions, and generally victory is achieved only after a long and patience-sapping ordeal, history shows that guerrillas can be defeated.

Between these extremes, the options are harder to define. As I would not be an armchair general, neither do I wish to indulge in too much dinner-table statecraft. In admitting that our country does have a number of options in connection with Vietnam, however, it necessarily follows that some attempt must be made to assess the stakes.

Conclusion

First, as explained in the State Department's bulletin on United States Policy in Vietnam, "Southeast Asia has great strategic significance in the forward defense of the United States. Its location across east-west air and sea lanes flanks the Indian subcontinent on one side, Australia, New Zealand and the Philippines on the other, and dominates the gateway between the Pacific and Indian Oceans. In Communist hands, this area would pose a most serious threat to the security of the United States and to the family of free world nations to which we belong."

It may be argued that in an age of intercontinental missiles, the strategic location of land bases is not as important as in previous eras. But this argument carries with it two major assumptions: (1) That our weapons delivery system has been perfected to assure reasonable retaliatory accuracy in the event of attack, and (2) That the Communist drive toward world domination will risk that kind of offensive. Both assumptions are open to question.

Second, as already noted, we are in Vietnam at the invitation of the Government of South Vietnam to help her defend her people and territory from Communist aggression. Shall we construe pulling out and abandoning a member of the free world family, however frail and often irritating that member may be, as the best possible alternative to a continuing expenditure of U.S. men, money and patience to halt the Communist march?

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At this point, let us return to Mr. Tayer's premise that all wars are fought for the political aim for which they were undertaken. Assuming the validity of this premise, we arrive at what is the cardinal stake in our efforts.

The Vietnam war falls into the category of what the Communists call their "wars of national liberation." In fact, they point to Vietnam as a prime test case of their strategy. For Hanoi, quoting again from the above-described State Department bulletin, "the immediate objective is limited: conquest of the South and national unification, perhaps coupled with control of Laos. For Peiping, however, Hanoi's victory would be only a first step toward eventual Chinese hegemony over the two Vietnams and Southeast Asia and toward exploitation of the new strategy in other parts of the world....Success in Vietnam would be regarded by Peiping as vindication for China's views in the world-wide ideological struggle."

All over the world today we see the tracks of international Communism: in the snows of Eastern Europe or on the sands of the Middle East; in the dust of Africa or through the jungles of South America or Southeast Asia. They may have been made by the Bear's paw or by the Dragon's Claw; they are ominous imprints in either case.

At some point, somewhere, the march must be halted. The responsibility for the conduct of our foreign affairs is in our President's hands, and we must leave it to the Administration to call the time and place. But of this I feel sure: the time and place, if not already upon us, must come.

In the absence of any as yet effective international peace-keeping body, let us resolve that America will stand by her principles and commitments to lead the Free World in defense of liberty and of the right of all nations to determine their own destinies in peace, with honor and dignity.

With best regards,

Your Congressman,

Joe Skubitz

Mao Tse-tung teaches that a successful guerrilla war must pass through three phases. Phase One is the pre-combat, indoctrination, organizational phase. Phase Two begins with the guerrillas, operating in small bands, harrying the army by ambushing its patrols, attacking its supply lines, raiding its munitions, sabotaging its communications, etc., and terrorizing the civilian population. In Phase Three, having worried, wearied, dispersed and weakened the "enemy," the guerrillas consolidate their units and move into an offensive adopting

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conventional methods. For an excellent discussion of guerrilla warfare, see Charles W. Thayer's book, *GUERRILLA*, available in paperback edition.

With regard to Dien Bien Phu, Mr. Thayer says, "The French defeat at Dien Bien Phu, while fatal to the French will to resist, was by no means militarily decisive, for the French troops involved comprised only a small fraction of the French forces in Indochina at the time. Clausewitz (the great military historian) ...pointed out that war can be and frequently is terminated short of military destruction or defeat of the enemy. When the political aim of the enemy involves a comparatively smaller sacrifice than the probable outlay required to defeat him, the will to resist him will be correspondingly smaller. In the case of the Indochinese war, the prospect of eventually defeating the Viet Cong was so dim after Dien Bien Phu, and the probable outlay in lives and funds so great, that the French political leaders in Paris preferred to sue for peace. A similar wave of defeatism seized certain political elements in Washington after the reversals in Vietnam in 1963 and 1964."

A separate declaration of the Conference stated that the truce line should not be considered permanent and called for nationwide elections in two years under the supervision of the ICC. Two years later, however, the Government of South Vietnam rejected the North Vietnamese Government's invitation to discuss the elections on the grounds that in North Vietnam the people would not be able to express their will freely and that falsified votes in North Vietnam could over-rule the votes in South Vietnam. The promise of truly nationwide elections continues unfulfilled.

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