

## COMMUNISM AND NATIONALISM IN VIETNAM IN RETROSPECT

1925-1985

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Mr President,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are gathered here today to "rethink" Vietnam. I shall do so, not only as a Vietnamese concerned with the fate, especially with the future, of his country and his people, but also, and much more, as a historian who, by inclination, has never ceased to think about Vietnam, and who, by training, has always been acutely aware of his obligation to constantly "rethink" Vietnam, as well as all other questions affecting the fate of mankind because they affect Vietnam.

For a historian, to say "rethink" is the same as to say "revise". And, for a historian, and generally, for a scientist, who has self-respect, to revise is a fundamental professional obligation. Yet, there are historians, political scientists, sociologists, linguists who claim to be also political scientists, to mention only a few prominent ones, who have been deploying great efforts to block what they call "the revisionist movement" related to Vietnam. There is no need for me to name them here. I want only to point out that they have been trying hard to practice intellectual terrorism against those who are engaged in the revision of Vietnamese history for reasons of

professional ethics, or simply of self-doubt, in the light of what has been happening to Vietnam and to the Vietnamese people since 1975.

The events occurring in Vietnam since the communist take-over in 1975 have been too dramatic to be ignored by the public. I shall therefore not waste your time by analysing them here, but I think that it is appropriate to mention them, as they are the facts which compel every honest and sensible person to "rethink" Vietnam. Those dramatic occurrences are: the unprecedented mass exodus of refugees from the country; the cold suppression of the South Vietnam Liberation Front; the adoption by the communist victors of a policy of systematic and brutal revenge against former government officials; the harsh victimisation of those who had not cooperated actively with the communist side; the imposition of a bolshevik style dictatorship of the proletariat on the whole country; the return of Vietnam to the undeniable status of a colonial dependency -- of the Soviet Union -- worse than the French or American protectorate; the frightening waste of Vietnamese human, material resources, and time, on social-imperialism in Southeast Asia (starting with Laos and Cambodia), and on a new costly conflict with a great power (China) at a time when peace and economic reconstruction and development were obviously first priorities for a government really caring about the people; and last, but surely not the least, the spectacular accelerating and apparently unstoppable economic decline.

The revision of Vietnam can apply to all kinds of aspects--

domestic, foreign; political, military; economic, social, cultural.....It has devolved on me to talk about communism and nationalism in Vietnam. There is much to say about this subject. But in the short time available to me, I shall not be able to cover such a big subject in detail. I shall therefore focus on only a few aspects of the Vietnam question which, in my view, have been seriously misunderstood by many people, especially in the West, among them those considered to be "experts" or "authorities" on Vietnam. One need only read again what those "experts" and "authorities" wrote before 1975 to realise how much and how far they had misled the public, with truly disastrous consequences for their countries and, I must add, for the Vietnamese people, as what has been happening in Vietnam since 1975 amply proves.

The first of the above mentioned aspects concerns Vietnamese communism, in particular its nature and its aims. The view prevailing over the years among wide circles was that the Vietnamese communists were nationalists who fought for the national independence of Vietnam. This belief was so prevalent and so strongly held that, in fact, it was a myth. And indeed, a myth it was, deliberately created, implanted and cultivated by the Vietnamese communists themselves, starting with Ho Chi Minh, and spread throughout the world by the enormous propaganda apparatus of the communist camp, with the active help of the communist sympathisers, and also of those who took pride in calling themselves "anti-colonialists", "anti-imperialists",

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"liberals", "democrats", "idealists", etc.....

The propagandists used material provided by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV), and aimed at public consumption. It was done uncritically, of course. And it is amazing to note how people who were so vigilant and so sharp-eyed in matters concerned with the deeds and words of their own governments, or of allied governments in the non-communist countries, suddenly became totally deaf and blind, and infantile, when it came to observing and judging the words and deeds of the Vietnamese communists.

If it were possible for the CPV to absolutely conceal everything, or keep absolute silence on everything, then ignoring and misjudging the nature and aims of the Vietnamese communists could be justified. But this is not the case. The CPV did hold congresses to debate and decide policies. Their leaders, Ho Chi Minh in particular, did speak to ranks and files on many occasions to enlighten them on the thinking and decisions of the CPV leadership, of himself, and of the international communist movement. The debates were reported in the Vietnamese communist press; the texts of resolutions, speeches, etc... were printed in communist documents and reviews. In a word, means existed for knowing with certainty the nature and aims of the Vietnamese communists, as opposed to what they said to the public, especially to the international public.

One of things that strike someone going carefully through the CPV publications aimed at the internal consumption of the

party is the constant emphasis to the ranks and files that the CPV was an internationalist bolshevik, and not a nationalist, party. A second one is the repeated insistence by the CPV leadership that party members must fully understand the duality of the strategic tasks of the party: 1) the achievement of national independence and 2) the building of socialism in Vietnam, that is, the turning of Vietnam into a communist state, or, the establishment in Vietnam of a dictatorship of the proletariat, in the name of pure marxism-leninism.

The achievement of national independence was therefore only the pre-condition of the turning of Vietnam into a communist state -- the establishment of proletarian dictatorship --. It was also the pre-condition of bringing Vietnam into the international communist camp, and the full alignment of Vietnam on Moscow, in the name of proletarian internationalism. This was therefore the reality. This reality was wrapped in the garb of nationalism. This was never clearly and fully understood by many people in the West because communist propaganda cleverly confused the issues in the minds of those people.

In propaganda, it was on the fight for Vietnam's national independence that the efforts of the CPV and world communists and communist sympathisers' were directed. Thus, the world's attention focused on the CPV's TACTICAL moves, which were often very spectacular, whereas, among themselves, as their internal documents prove, the communists quietly and constantly reminded one another that THE STRATEGIC AIMS OF THE PARTY NEVER CHANGE.

The strategic aims are, as shown above: turning Vietnam into a communist state, establishing dictatorship of the proletariat in Vietnam, bringing Vietnam into the international communist camp, aligning Vietnam on Moscow.

The Vietnamese communists were thus successful in their deceptive maneuvers -- we call it today their "disinformation" campaign -- by making the world focus on their TACTICAL MOVES while they were pursuing their STRATEGIC AIMS. This applies to their other major moves, in particular to the presentation of the South Vietnam Liberation Front as a southern indigenous movement and not a creation and fighting arm and instrument of North Vietnam for its subversion and eventual invasion of South Vietnam.

It is surprising how easy it was for the CPV to mislead the world. Even those considered "experts" and "authorities" on Vietnam eagerly swallowed the CPV propaganda line that the Vietnamese communists were nationalists fighting for Vietnam's national independence, and that it was "reactionary" and immoral to try stop them. Yet, if one takes the trouble of studying Lenin and Leninism, even casually, one would find that practically everything applied by the CPV, in particular bolshevik socialism, was taken from Lenin. Also, if one studies Ho Chi Minh's speeches, one of the outstanding features of them is that Ho himself affirmed and reaffirmed that he was an absolute believer in Lenin and in Leninism, and constantly reminded his disciples of the necessity to remain "pure" marxist-

leninists and "true" proletarian internationalists.

So, if one wants to "rethink" Vietnam, one of the tasks one must set oneself is to re-examine Vietnamese communism by examining carefully the internal documents of the CPV, and not its public declarations, and so, in the light of Leninism. This naturally includes a careful study of Leninism/Bolshevism and of the Third International, and a comparison of what Lenin has said with what Ho Chi Minh and the other CPV leaders have said and done. I am convinced that this will shed a new light on Vietnam, as well as on those who have misled international opinion, in particular French and American opinion, into believing that the Vietnam wars were "immoral", that France and the United States had waged a "dirty war" in Vietnam because they killed those whose only crime was to desire passionately national independence for their country.

It is true that many Vietnamese patriots were killed in these wars. But they got killed because they had been misled by the communists into believing that war, and hating and killing Frenchmen and Americans, were patriotic, legitimate, and the only way of gaining national independence and improving their lives and those of their children. There is no need to prove to the Vietnamese living in utter misery and oppression under communist rule today that the communists had simply exploited the nationalism of the Vietnamese people for communist ends, and that the only winners of the Vietnam wars are the CPV and the "Liên xô" (the Soviet Union), and not the Vietnamese people.

Once all the aforesaid has been noted, a fact remains undisputable, however, if we refer only to the period 1945-1975, and that is: the communists won, and the nationalists lost. Why? This is the second aspect of the Vietnam question I wish to clarify. To have a clear perspective of the defeat of the nationalists in Vietnam, one must place Vietnam in a broader world historical context, in particular in the context of the struggle waged by international communism since 1919 to achieve world hegemony, and the reactions of the non-communist nations, especially their ability, or inability, to respond to the communist challenge.

Viewed in the above context, the Vietnamese nationalists never really had a chance from 1925 onward. The Vietnamese inevitably lost because the non-communist world lost. Yet, the prevalent view, another myth about Vietnam, during the war, especially in the United States, was that the war was lost because of the Vietnamese nationalists. Applying this kind of argument, one could say that World War II was lost initially because of the French, and was won in 1945 also thanks to the French.

In any case, the year 1925 was that in which the Vietnamese great nationalist leader Phan Boi Chau, who had moved to China from Japan because he had been expelled by the Japanese at the request of the French Government, was sold by the CPV to the French secret police in Shanghai for 100,000, or 150,000, piastres when he was going to a secret meeting proposed by Ho Chi



Minh. That left the field wide open to the CPV, and especially to Ho, who was then a dwarf compared to Phan Boi Chau.

Next, in 1930, the nationalists were practically annihilated following the abortive Yen Bay revolt of the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (VNQDD) and the massive repression by the French colonial authorities. From then until 1945, the Vietnamese nationalist parties ceased to exist as an effective force. Again that left the field wide open to the CPV. The latter was also practically annihilated following the failure of the Nghe-Tinh Soviets in 1930-1931. But, in contrast to the VNQDD, it was salvaged by the Communist International. By 1934, it was able to operate again. And in 1936-1939, thanks to the establishment of the Front Populaire Government in France (as a result of a shift of policy by the Comintern), it was able to consolidate and expand. The Vietnamese nationalist parties never had an international organisation like the Comintern to back them. This was true between 1930 and 1939, just as it has been true since 1939. This was still more obvious after the United States Government, under the pressure of the US Congress, had to abandon Vietnam to its fate in 1975.

The decisive period was however 1940-1945. It was during this period, in particular, during March-October 1945, and not in 1954 or 1975, that Vietnam was really lost, as a result of a combination of factors adverse to the nationalists, but which helped put Ho Chi Minh into power at a crucial moment, giving him the benefit of occupation, i.e. of nine points of the law.

First there was the destruction of the French fleet, at Mers el Kebir, then at Toulon, which was to deprive General de Gaulle of independent means for transporting troops to Indochina in 1945, before, and especially after the Japanese surrender. This left the CPV free to seize power in Hanoi in August 1945 because it had an army. The army was small -- a few hundred men -- but it was the only one in existence then and there.

Next, under the influence of Admiral Darlan, Admiral Decoux chose to side with Marshall Petain rather than General de Gaulle, and took Indochina with him; he thus offered the CPV a chance of fighting the French authorities in Indochina -- considered allies of the fascist powers -- while at the same time avoiding disobeying Stalin's orders to communists to place themselves under the authority of the Allied Governments -- capitalist and colonial powers included -- in the fight against fascism. And when the Vichy Government decided to accept Japanese occupation, and later, to cooperate with Japan in the defence of Indochina-- obviously against the Allies, which, in Indochina, meant the United States --, it simply handed Ho Chi Minh a great political asset which he was to use in obtaining American military and political support by claiming to be "anti-Jap".

Non-communist Vietnamese nationalists, and the Vietnamese population in general, did not consider either Japan or America as an enemy. The nationalist parties, however, made a fatal mistake in forgetting the broader aspects of the international situation, and in concentrating their attention only on seeking

immediate support against the French colonial authorities. They did not realise at all that by siding with Japan they gained only a temporary and weakening ally, while becoming a de facto enemy of the United States, or in any case, that their act could be so interpreted by Americans with no understanding of Vietnamese nationalism. This was to prove disastrous to the Vietnamese nationalists cause in 1944 and 1945.

The next factor working against the Vietnamese nationalists was the Japanese coup of March 9, 1945, and Japanese policy following this coup. The coup saved the CPV from destruction, or at least from being crippled for years, as it prevented the French colonial authorities from carrying out a mopping up campaign against the communist bases in the jungles of Northern Vietnam. It also left the communists free to operate and expand their influence throughout the country, and especially in North Vietnam. On the other hand, Japanese policy of simply replacing the French protectorate instead of really helping the Bao Dai Government to become a truly independent and especially to build an army, put Bao Dai in 1945 in the position of being considered a Japanese "collaborator" and empty-handed in the face of an anti-Japanese CPV possessing an army, in effective occupation of Hanoi, and outwardly enjoying American support. Bao Dai's abdication --largely caused by his sense of isolation and impotence -- deprived the Vietnamese non-communist nationalists of a rallying political center, and forced many to cooperate with the Viet Minh (i.e., the CPV), there being no alternative then.

Then, there was American help to Ho Chi Minh from Roosevelt and from OSS-China, especially from Major A.Patti. By systematically blocking all French attempts, including Gaullist attempts, to regain a foothold in Indochina, Roosevelt gave a capital help to Ho Chi Minh. It made it possible for him to arrive in Hanoi first, and with an army, in August, after the Japanese surrender. THIS IS THE MOST DECISIVE EVENT IN THE HISTORY OF VIETNAM IN THE PERIOD 1925-1975. The Vietnamese nationalists, like everyone else, had to face this fait accompli.

The next most important event working against the Vietnamese nationalists was the development and use of the A-bomb leading to the Japanese sudden surrender. As a result of the suddenness of this surrender, the Bao Dai Government had no time to strengthen itself, and especially to build up an army, while the other nationalist parties were still in China. In Northern Vietnam, Roosevelt's policy made it impossible for the French to obtain the maintenance of the status quo by the Japanese, as in Southern Vietnam. This naturally disadvantaged Vietnamese nationalists and favoured the communists.

The next third most important factor working against the Vietnamese nationalists and in favour of the communists was the help given by the US to Ho Chi Minh and the CPV to build an army, and to monopolise the leadership of the nationalist movement in 1945 thanks to their association with the OSS officials, in particular with the chief of OSS in Northern Indochina, Major A.Patti. There is plenty of evidence today showing how this

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helped Ho eliminate his nationalist rivals, and seize the leadership of the nationalist movement in 1945.

The Chinese Kuomintang Yunnan Generals also helped Ho Chi Minh eliminate his non-communist rivals and seize the leadership of the Vietnamese nationalist organisations, first in China in 1940-1944, then in Hanoi in 1945. We know from researches made by Chinese scholars that some of these Generals were communists or communist sympathisers; some were corrupt. But the result of their actions was to give Ho a big head start on the other nationalists.

Lastly, the desire of French officials -- diplomatic and military -- in charge in North Vietnam in 1945-1946 for short term easy solutions also handicapped the nationalists while helping Ho consolidate his position. The short term solutions include a landing in North Vietnam without fighting -- and hence with the agreement, that is the recognition, of the Ho Chi Minh Government, thus strengthening Ho's position at the expense of the other nationalists --. The short terms solutions include also helping Ho Chi Minh annihilate the other nationalist parties by non-intervention (although the French were allowed to return as representatives of the Allies and responsible for the maintenance of law and order and protection of all Vietnamese), and even by active military assistance. Lastly, the short term solutions included recognition of Ho's Government and the invitation to Ho to make a state visit to France. On the other hand, the French authorities ruined the chances of the

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nationalists rallied round Bao Dai by refusing them in September 1947 -- the last chance -- the political weapons -- total and immediate national independence and unification -- to wrest leadership of the nationalist movement from Ho Chi Minh. The development of events from September 1947 onward is well known, and there is no need to dwell on them here.

I lack time to dwell on another factor, which has been one of the major causes of the defeat of the nationalists in 1975, and that is the help given by President Kennedy to Ho Chi Minh by doing for Ho a job which Ho and his men were unable to do themselves: the overthrow of President Diem and the disintegration of the South Vietnam state -- thereby destroying the firm leadership and the strong state apparatus needed to bar the way to a communist takeover. I consider this, together with Roosevelt's policy as two of the really fundamental causes of the victory of communism in Vietnam. They made it possible for the communists to gain a commanding position militarily and politically at crucial moments. This made the defeat of the Vietnamese nationalists inevitable. And not just the Vietnamese nationalists. Other people and nations too. But that is another story which it is not my assignment to tell.

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I would like to conclude by expanding on a point mentioned earlier: international assistance. From 1925 to 1975, and even to the present date, the CPV has always had continuous and firm international support and help -- political, diplomatic, military, economic, financial --, first from the Comintern, then

from various forms of Comintern. The Vietnamese nationalists, in 1925, and since then, never really enjoyed this kind of help, for a number of reasons, into which lack of time does not permit me to go. But I would like to stress that if in 1931, after their almost total destruction, the Vietnamese communists were able to revive and expand, then conquer power, today, there is, to my knowledge, no such powerful permanent international organisation to help the Vietnamese nationalists, or other non-communist organisations, revive and fight until such time as circumstances make it possible for them to go on the offensive and reconquer power.

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In rethinking Vietnam, one of the conclusions one can draw is the following: if there is a strong and stable international organisation, with a solid administrative and financial structure; with a dedicated, perceptive and well informed leadership; and above all, with unwavering determination and continuity of policy, to help those who, in Vietnam and elsewhere, want to prove that communism is neither inevitable nor unremovable, then the challenge which international communism poses to the world could be met more effectively. This challenge has existed since 1919. It has always been there, although, for leninist tactical reasons, it has been given different names and different forms at different times to suit different situations. This is something which unfortunately too few people realise. Thank you for your attention.

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