

Ton That Thien
“The War in Vietnam”

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The Vietnamese conflict, which started three weeks after Japan's surrender to the Allies, is now (February 1966) in its twenty first year (twenty fifth, if one includes the Second World War). Beneath the ripples and the waves, what are the deep currents which have kept it going and boiling for so long? What kind of war is being fought there? What are the chances for each side of winning – or not losing there? What are the chances for each side of winning – or not losing – the war? And, in relationship to South Vietnam – which interests us particularly – what ought to be done, and what can be done, to insure its victory or survival? Those are questions on which it is the purpose of this paper to attempt to throw some light.

The Cause of a Prolonged War

Two words give us the key to the understanding of the causes of the prolonged and bitter war in Vietnam: ‘liberation and freedom’. The second is the war cry of the South, and the first, that of the North (and of the Liberation Front of South Vietnam, generally believed to be its agent in the South). Together, they represent the deep-seated aspirations of the Vietnamese people, and constitute their war aims. So long as these aims remain unfulfilled, conflict in one form or another, open or latent, violent or subdued, will continue.

In Vietnamese eyes, ‘liberation’ means securing first national independence and sovereignty, and next, social justice and progress (or modernization). Negatively, it means getting rid of foreign domination, feudal privileges, and underdevelopment. Further, since Vietnam had been split into three parts under French rule (later reduced to two by the great powers at Geneva in 1954), national unification has become an integral part of ‘liberation’.

If ‘liberation’ has a deep meaning in the eyes of the Vietnamese, so has ‘freedom’. The latter has become a catchword embodying a strong desire among the articulate elements of the population for democratic liberties, and among the masses, for equality. The enjoyment of these rights and what they bring – a better life – is visualized through the establishment of democratic institutions, the adoption of democratic practices, and the rejection of all forms of dictatorships. Lastly, in Vietnam, like in other Asian countries, backwardness is considered a cause of national weakness leading to foreign domination, and the desire to get rid of it quickly is as strong as the willingness to accept hardship to achieve it.

The national and individual aspirations and aims for the attainment of which many Vietnamese have fought and died are therefore: #1) National independence, #2) National unification, #3) Social justice, #4) Democracy and #5) Modernisation. What are they but a yearning for dignity, both national and individual? As long as dignity for their country and dignity for themselves have not been secured, the Vietnamese will, one way or another, persist in their struggle. This question of dignity is something about which the Vietnamese feel highly emotional. It is this, and not material considerations, which is the most important element of their motivations. At the thought of being deprived of it by foreign domination they react strongly.

But the moment national independence ceases to be a predominant concern; the question of democracy is bound to come up to the surface. In South Vietnam, Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem was overthrown in November 1963 although he was a staunch nationalist who had done much for Vietnam's independence. This was done in the name of democracy and freedom. Since 1963, however, Vietnam has lived under a military regime. But there are strong indications that this will not last and the prospects of freedom are reasonably promising. Not so promising, however, are those of independence. In the North, on the other hand, Communism has established itself firmly. The Democratic Republic of Vietnam [North Vietnam] has proclaimed its unswerving loyalty to the Communist cause, and prided itself in being the 'outpost of socialism in South-East Asia'. Communism is denial of individual freedom. There is no need to belabor this point for the enlightenment of the Vietnamese. They know it well. The Vietnamese have been offered liberation without freedom, or freedom without liberation. In this double half-offer lies the tragedy of Vietnam, and the main cause of a prolonged war.

The Nature of the War

From the point of view of North Vietnam, liberation has not been achieved or completed because half of the country still escapes Communist control, and far from being ended, foreign presence has become more obvious, and foreign influence heavier, than ever. This influence no longer comes from a weakened colonial power – which France was in the immediate post-war year – but from the most powerful nation on earth, the United States. To eject this power would be far beyond the means of North Vietnam alone. Appeal must be made to, and support and aid must be secured from, the bigger Communist nations, and in particular, from Communist China, conveniently so near and so militant. But in doing this, the government of North Vietnam lays its flanks open to attacks. It gives the South the precious advantage of being able to present the war it is waging against the Viet Cong as a war for the liberation of the country not only from Communism, but also from Chinese domination. This is a telling argument in a country where anti-Chinese sentiments are deep-rooted, because, for centuries, the traditional threat to its independence has come from China.

From the point of view of South Vietnam, the threat to freedom not only has continued to exist, but worse, has been compounded: pressure from outside has been added to pressure from inside its borders, invasion on top of subversion. Hence the appeal to the Free World nations for assistance. Naturally, this gave North Vietnam the propaganda

argument it needed most. The war in the South is presented by the North as a war of liberation from Western imperialism, personified in this case by the most imperialist nation on earth by Communist books, the United States. The vicious circle was thus beautifully completed.

North Vietnam has never made secret that its aim is to carry out a socialist revolution based on the teachings of Marxism-Leninism. It has sought to base its power on the peasants – who form the majority of the population – and it has made land reform and class-war its most important policy planks. This was carried in a radical manner, by a ruthless dispossession of the rich and ‘middle’ landowners labeled ‘class-enemies’. But it is obviously difficult to determine the demarcation line between the two categories, and easy to make mistakes. Indeed, serious mistakes were made in 1956, and this sparked peasant rebellions in several provinces. Communism or no Communism, the North suffers from an unsurmountable handicap: it is poor and is bound to remain poor. There is little to divide, and the best propaganda cannot convince the people of the virtues of Communism if the general standard of living does not improve.

The risks of mixing up classes exist also in the South, especially as more cadres have been sent recently from the North to maintain morale and discipline. Out of unawareness of local conditions, they antagonize the local peasantry who own much more land than their northern counterparts. A man possessing one hectare of land in the South is a poor peasant, whereas in the North an owner of the same is a big landlord. In fact, there are indications that the cadres from the North are no more popular with the local population than their compatriots in the South Vietnam Government.

However, it remains true that the Communists enjoy the advantage of fighting against a series of conservative bourgeois governments, and of operating in a country where big property and gross inequalities have survived, in spite of several land reforms, and perhaps because of them. What has been done was half-hearted on the part of the governments in power, or foiled by the vested interests (through bribery of central and local officials). It is therefore natural that the peasants should dislike and mistrust the Saigon government, suspected of representing and defending big landlord interests. Naturally, Communist propaganda feeds on this feeling and fans it to the utmost.

In addition, South Vietnam has become the refuge of some of the rather undesirable elements of Vietnamese society, who flocked into the cities and the government-controlled areas to avoid the people’s courts and executioners, especially after the Geneva Conference. Many military and civilian officials with heavy records of corruption, peddlers of political influence, commercial sharks and others, have descended on the South like a swarm of locusts on a green rice field. Of course, not all ‘northerners’ who moved to the South are of this type; but those who are do constitute a significant section. They have aroused the hostility of the local population partly because they are corrupt, and partly because they are ‘northerners.’

This traditional antagonism is perhaps not extraordinary in itself. It exists in other countries also. But in the case of Vietnam, it is compounded by the fact that compared to

the North, the South seems an Eldorado, and the Southerners look upon their Northern compatriots, who are more hard working, enterprising, quick-witted and money conscious, as the unscrupulous poachers on their domain. The best positions in the government – civilian and military – as well as an important part of the country's business and property, have somehow fallen into the hands of the Northerners. The Southerners, who form the majority of the population, would therefore feel either indifferent or hostile toward a government dominated by Northerners, which gives them no predominant voice and little benefit. This is a capital weakness, particularly when this government is engaged in a war which is essentially a revolutionary war.

The Chances of Each Side

The Communists have been able to develop some sort of a popular base, and they possess hardened and well indoctrinated cadres. Consequently, they have been able to wage guerrilla warfare with a considerable measure of success. In fact, they were so successful in the winter of 1964 that they believed they could move from stage II into stage III of protracted warfare that is from a position of equilibrium of forces to that of strategic offensive to overwhelm South Vietnam and give it the knock-out blow. That was a fatal mistake.

Instead of adhering strictly to the rules of revolutionary war, that is to a careful weighing of both the military and political factors and possibilities, both national and international, the Viet Cong immediately moved on to the initial assault. If they had observed restraint and maintained just enough pressure to deepen and widen the chaos prevailing in South Vietnam in the wake of Diem's disappearance, they would have precipitated the collapse of the Government of South Vietnam, and at the same time strengthened the hands of the defeatists, pacifists and partisans of neutralisation in the United States. South Vietnam would have fallen into their hands within a year, or even less. Naturally, they would have to sit in a coalition government in a neutralized South Vietnam for a time. But there is little doubt that with their organization and prestige, they could dominate such a government and progressively eliminate the other elements. This indeed had been the aims of the Liberation Front until the end of 1964. The fatal mistake of the Communists was to have looked too short, and moved too fast. In Communist jargon, they had made an incorrect appraisal of objective realities.

It is human to err, and, after all, the Communists are human. Thus, the Viet Cong carried a series of big attacks against the Government forces in the winter of 1964, the most spectacular of which were the battle of Binh-Gia, only a few miles from the famous sea-resort – and military base – of Vung Tau (formerly Cap Saint Jacques), where they inflicted such severe losses on several battalions of Government marines as to virtually destroy them as an effective force. South Vietnam was about to collapse. The United States became alarmed. Another aspect of their fatal mistake was the terrorist attacks against the American billets at Pleiku in February, and at Qui Nhon in March, both resulting in heavy American casualties. Those were direct challenges thrown at the United States.

The response was equal to the challenge. This must have been a big surprise to the Communists, who had long thought that, after Korea and the cries of 'no more Koreas', the United States would never intervene directly in another conflict on the Asian mainland because such an intervention would be fighting 'the wrong war against the wrong enemy, in the wrong place'. But twenty-four hours after the Viet Cong attack on Pleiku in February, President Johnson ordered the United States Air Force to strike at North Vietnam. A bare two weeks after the attack on Qui Nhon in March, American marines landed on the Vietnamese coast, against a new and powerful enemy.

Since then, the American build-up has gone on apace. From a mere 3,500 in March, they reached the figure of 54,000 in July 1964 and 200,000 in February 1965 (compared with 23,000 in 1963, 12,000 in 1961, 700 in 1959, and 400 in 1954). This figure is by no means a ceiling, and President Johnson has stated that General Westmoreland would get more men as he needed them. The figure 400,000 has been mentioned as the probable, and that of 600,000 as the possible, eventual size of the American forces in Vietnam. To these should be added the 70,000 men of the Seventh Fleet, and 30,000 others in the United States, in Hawaii, Okinawa, the Philippines, Japan, and Formosa, employed at maintaining the American forces in Vietnam.

To support these huge forces, a string of bases, called 'enclaves', have been established at the cost of over half a billion dollars. The largest of them is Cam Ranh, which has become an air and naval station accessible to several ocean liners at the same time, capable of holding 45 days of supplies, and containing the largest operational airfield in South-East Asia. Weapons of all kinds have been brought to Vietnam, and the war budget has jumped from 1.7 billion dollars in 1964 to 5 billion in 1966 (15 billion if pay pensions, and various allowances of the men and other indirect costs are included). The budget for 1967 is 10 billion. The total cost of the Vietnam war up to February 1966 was 18 billion, larger than the expenditures on the four years of the Korean war. It has been estimated that it costs 52,500 dollars to kill a Viet Cong. The scope of the activities of the American forces has been also widened. From that of 'advisers', they have become active combatants shooting first instead of waiting to be shot at before returning fire. They have engaged the Viet Cong in some of the biggest battles of the war (Chu Lai in the summer and Ia-Drang and Chu-Prong in the autumn of 1965).

More extensive and more active participation in the war naturally means more casualties. From a total of 250 for the entire four years 1961-1963, these have jumped to 2,108 killed, 10,291 wounded, and 160 missing as of 17 February, 1966. The casualty list will certainly not level off there, on the contrary.

While the American forces have taken over the main combat role, the Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam (A.R.V.N.) have been increasingly employed for 'pacification', that is moving in, mopping up the Viet Cong remnants, holding the territory, protecting the population, and eventually winning them over to the Government side through civil action, thus depriving the Viet Cong of their popular base. The A.R.V.N. number nominally 500,000 of whom 210,000 belong to the regular army and the rest to regional,

militia and popular forces. In spite of their numbers, the A.R.V.N. is not strong because of poor morale and poor leadership, the second factor being a major cause of the first. By themselves, therefore, and until drastic changes have occurred, they are in no position to defeat the Viet Cong.

To the surprise of the Americans, the Communist forces have also increased fast, in spite of the serious setbacks they had suffered in the summer and autumn of 1965, and in spite of the devastating attacks on their staging areas, bases and communications by the American Air Force. As of 16 February, their effectives were 237,000 men compared with 165,000 in the summer of 1965 and 140,000 in late 1964. Of these, 17,000 to 20,000 are P.A.V.N. (People's Army of Vietnam) troops infiltrated from the North. The rate of infiltration had been 1,800 per month in the previous 18 months (with a peak of 4,500 in the early winter of 1965) according to disclosures by General Westmoreland at the Honolulu Conference. Of the remaining, 60,000 are regulars, 100,000 guerillas, 40,000 political cadres and 17,000 support troops.

Their armaments have also been improved. Among the 31 P.A.V.N. battalions (9 regiments) identified in the South, there is at least one anti-aircraft battalion, and the Viet Cong have also begun to sue 120mm. mortars. More and more captured weapons and ammunitions betray Russian, Chinese and East European origins. The Communists have naturally to maintain their rate of infiltration to make up for the losses suffered. These losses are high. Between 1961 and 1965 the Viet Cong lost an estimated 104,500 killed and 250,000 wounded. (37,000 were killed in 1965 alone.) Their losses are higher than those of the A.R.V.N. which are 30,427 and 23,009 respectively, to which should be added 20,000 civilian officials or cadres assassinated.)

Desertions from both sides are equally high. According to figures released by the South Vietnam government, 30,345 Viet Cong, including P.A.V.N. soldiers, have heeded the 'Chieu Hoi' call (Open Arms) since February 1961, two-thirds of them in the last two years. Once allowance has been made for deliberate planting of Viet Cong agents, or civilians attracted by monetary rewards, the figure still remains significant. No official figures relating to desertions on the South Vietnam government's side have been released. But General Westmoreland disclosed at Honolulu on February 6 that 60 percent of the A.R.V.N. conscripts had deserted in 1965. According to the South Vietnam ministry of defense 46,000 were conscripted into the A.R.V.N. in the same year. The number of desertions in 1965 alone was, therefore, 27,600. The total figure is certainly higher if we include the para-military forces. The number of deserters is thus comparable for both sides, an indication that morale has deteriorated on both sides. The obvious inference from this is that, looking at the picture as a whole, that is both politically and military, the chances for both sides of winning a decisive victory are equally bad.

After their serious setbacks of the summer and autumn of 1965, the Viet Cong have reverted to ambushes and small raids, and terrorist activities. But these, by themselves, cannot bring about the defeat and the withdrawal of the American forces. There is little chance of the Viet Cong scoring a new Dien Bien Phu in the near future. It is equally clear after the inconclusive large scale operations staged by the Americans and their allies

since the beginning of this year (Zone D, Plain of Reeds, Binh Duong, in the Mekong Delta and Ao Lao in Central Vietnam) that the Communist forces cannot be so easily destroyed and that they cannot be defeated by military means alone. The result would, therefore, be a politico-military stalemate, in which the Viet Cong hold the political, and the American-Vietnamese side, the military advantage. This stalemate can be broken only if there emerges in the South a government capable of really 'pacifying' the country, that is of depriving the Viet Cong of their political base.

The Conditions and Chances of South Vietnam's Survival

The United States' decision to intervene directly and massively saved South Vietnam from falling into Communist hands in the winter of 1964. But the United States Government has problems of its own. Public opinion may not go on supporting intervention in Vietnam and may demand the withdrawal of the American forces from there under the cover of a face-saving settlement that would give North Vietnam the chance of getting at the Conference table what is denied to it on the battlefield by American arms. It is true that the United States Government has repeatedly affirmed its intention of honoring its commitments to South Vietnam, in particular of not abandoning it to Communist conquest. But the United States being a democratic country, the American government will eventually have to swim with the tide of public opinion. There is no certainty that this opinion will not change. In fact there are risks that it may even swing sharply.

On the other hand, American support, aid and protection cannot be expected to last forever. The United States is committed to help South Vietnam repel Communist aggression, that is invasion or large scale armed insurgency. It has made no commitment to save South Vietnam in every and any circumstance, in particular in the complete breakdown of law and order, which would leave the Viet Cong alone in the field, or in the case of the people of South Vietnam voting into power through free and internationally supervised elections, a government which would request the withdrawal of American troops, in the ignorance that it could not survive long after that. In the first case continued American intervention would amount to *de facto* occupation of South Vietnam – although the purpose of such an occupation is to protect it against a Communist take-over – and in the second, occupation of a country against the expressed will and wish of its people. In both cases, the American government will face an untenable situation.

For the time being, those two dangers have been averted. But they continue to lurk in the background. It is therefore urgent that there should be in South Vietnam a government which is both strong and popular. Both of these conditions must be fulfilled if Communism is to be checked, then defeated, and eventually eliminated.

What does 'strong and popular' Government mean? A popular government will be one able to convince the Vietnamese people that their aspirations are being really and fully, or at least largely met. Those aspirations, which have been described and stressed earlier,

are *liberation* and *freedom* – the enjoyment of dignity both national and personal: national independence, social justice, democracy, modernization. The last word is used in the sense of technical equality with the West and not simply, nor essentially, technical progress. As such it implies a desire for getting rid of inequality much more than for seeking material improvement.

Too much emphasis has been laid on the need of the underdeveloped countries – and Vietnam is one of them – for this material improvement – more and better food, clothes, medical care, houses etc.; too little has been said about the Vietnamese craving for dignity, for the sense of pride of being a free and respected Vietnamese citizen of an independent Vietnam, equal to all, slave of none, and capable of forcing the respect of others. This craving can be satisfied only by the conviction that Vietnam is really free from foreign control and enjoys the real chances of moving forward along a path of progress of its own choosing.

The embodiment of this conviction would be the presence at the head of Vietnam of a government of men known to be men of integrity, virtue, dignity, competence and dedication to the welfare of their people, and not just of men who happen to be temporarily in control of the power apparatus, that is, of the means to enforce their will by sheer physical coercion. Such a Government must be *free from the slightest suspicion of being controlled by foreign powers, or that it is but the servant of foreign interests*. In these men and through these the Vietnamese must see the image of the Vietnamese race at its best as they know it from the history of their country.

It has been stressed, and it must be stressed again, that to be acceptable to the majority of the people of South Vietnam – and to have the ability of developing a popular base in a revolutionary war, such a Government must be in the main a government of Southerners. Its first task will be to restore the authority of the Central Government by achieving unity of thought and action, and above all, unity of command, which has broken down since the disappearance of Diem. This means that the army, the police and the civil service shall have to be brought under its effective control. Lastly, it must build a political apparatus capable of wresting control over the population from the Viet Cong.

The emergence of such a government would be, more than anything, the trick that would turn the political tide against Communism in Vietnam. Once the political tide has turned, the military mud will be washed away. The war will end because there will be no more men to bear arms for the other side and give it help and comfort.

Do such men exist in Vietnam at present? Who are they? They certainly exist, as Vietnam's history, both past and recent, constantly reminds us. If they do, where are they? Why then have they not made their appearance so far? That is a good question. And the obvious answer is that they have not judged the time ripe for it, like the hunter seeing the tiger approaching and holding his fire – until the beast offers the best angle to him. That is in keeping with the Vietnamese national temperament. This seeming inertia, which exasperates the unwarned Westerner, is used as a sort of weapon, both political and military. The impatient Westerner may reply that by the time the man

makes up his mind, it may be too late. This is possible, but not likely, because the man is a Vietnamese, acting on, and reacting to, a Vietnamese environment – a hunter knowing the habits of local tigers and hunting grounds. He knows what has been overlooked by many, namely, as Marshal Foch said, that when it rains, it rains also on the enemy's camp. Armed with this knowledge and listening to his political instinct, he will wait to do the right thing, at the right time.

Meanwhile, Vietnam will be safe enough because American military power will contain the Communists. If this containment lasts long enough, and if the United States has enough wisdom to avoid the mistakes that will turn the present revolutionary war into a liberation war, if it helps an independent, dignified, progressive, and competent Government to emerge, the chances of South Vietnam checking, then defeating, and eventually eliminating Communism will not be negligible.