VIETNAM: DIRTY, BRUTAL AND DIFFICULT

Few events in recent history have so revealed the need for informed public discussion as the present war in Vietnam. Unhappily it has also revealed the grave inadequacy, the near absence of that discussion. The articles which follow do more than simply advocate positions; they attempt to show, as one contributor says, that “the moral equation is more a function of the facts themselves than some persons recognize.”

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THE BASES FOR A U.S. VICTORY

Thomas Molnar

The American liberal would, I am sure, indignantly reject any supposition that he looks down upon the non-white races and that in his heart of hearts he has contempt for the underdeveloped countries and their population. In his rather narrow view all that the “underdeveloped man,” in this case the South Vietnamese, wants is food and peace at any price; therefore American presence in Saigon, the liberal says, which is motivated by selfish imperialism, merely delays the desired and reasonable dénouement.

A similar contempt is apparent in President Johnson’s offer of one billion dollar aid to Southeast Asia if only Peking and Hanoi show willingness to settle the war in Vietnam. Does it not occur to Mr. Johnson that communism is an idea, and that its adherents may not be bought? That, to be sure, they want access to the rice paddies of the Delta, but they want political domination too?

Such are our thoughts while reading on-the-spot reports of the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Saigon. The striking thing was the first reaction of Vietnamese passers-by. Hopefully they asked our sol-diers “Now you will bomb Hanoi, yes?” Contrary to the assumption of the liberal press, they do not seem to hate Americans, or desire a new Geneva (a new Munich, one should say) with the expected outcome: neutralization of South Vietnam; a brief period under a “coalition” government (as in China between 1945 and 1949) gradually undermined by the Communist—or N.L.F.—partner. Although the political phenomenon is not exhausted by exclusive reference to morality, this solution should hardly satisfy the moralizers; after all, millions of Vietnam-ese, among them close to a million Catholics, demonstrated in 1954 their attachment to rice and freedom by escaping from Communist-engulfed North. Why should we now force them back under the same rule?

But the war in Vietnam, our critics answer, is really a civil war between the government and the Viet Cong. Even if this insidious statement was factual, why should Washington not intervene on the pro-Western side (as it did in Greece), counter balancing with its superior armed might Peking’s and Hanoi’s advantage of shorter supply routes?

The chief argument of Walter Lippmann and the professors’ chorus accompanying it is that we cannot fight a protracted war so far from home in the jungles of Indochina; and that if we do, escalation is inevitable with an atomic war at the end. The French too, it is said, had to pull out in the end, and de
French military mistakes and allied hesitations—does not prove, however, that the United States cannot secure victory, that is, a firm and permanent foothold, in Vietnam. Such a victory would not have to include the conquest of North Vietnam, only a Korea-type settlement: indefinitely prolonged presence of the American army; borders closed to infiltration, and, more importantly, notice served to world communism that we do not yield, nor do we abandon our allies. After all, such a “notice” was understood at Korea too, and it gave us twelve years of respite in East Asia. That this is well within the realm of possibilities was explained to me in Saigon by American officers; they told me that the situation is quite tenable, that no centers of strategic importance are in Viet Cong hands, and that the morale of American and Vietnamese forces is excellent— notwithstanding frequent Western press reports about the “demoralized Vietnamese soldiers.” But they added that the future depends on the decisions of Congress and the American people at home.

Yet, as Jules Roy remarks—and he is certainly no “imperialist warmonger”—Dienbienphu was no strategic defeat. But, although the defenders displayed incredible heroism, the high command and the government in Paris were convinced that only through negotiations could they put an end to it all, and pull out without losing face in addition to losing the war. While the news of the Geneva Conference, called together for May 1954, created consternation and despair among the French troops, the same announcement gave new courage to the Vietminh. Its military commander, General Giap, easily persuaded his superiors in the party that a spectacular, well-timed, victory at Dienbienphu would represent a decisive trump card at Geneva by impressing the participants. On the Western side, at the same time, President Eisenhower vetoed the Radford plan, and Churchill, consulted about the British attitude, was unwilling to jeopardize the prospects of trade with Red China.

It is therefore true, on the surface, that the Viet Cong operates as a network of independent units; but each gives regular accounts of their activities to Hanoi which punishes the officer responsible when, for example, a valuable hostage dies in their hands or when “taxes” are not collected.

It is important to understand this strategic, although perhaps not tactical, dependence of the Viet Cong on Hanoi because the opposite view has gained a sudden, but not inexplicable, popularity in the United States. We are told now that the Viet Cong are recruited among citizens and peasants of the

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South who fight the American intruder but owe no allegiance to North Vietnam and take no orders from Ho Chi Minh, let alone Mao Tse-tung.

Let us consider the timing of this version, now so popular a theme at “teach-ins” at big universities (Michigan, Columbia). Until about the end of last year the partisans of “pull out of Vietnam” conceded at least that the Communists in Hanoi and Peking actively help the Viet Cong, and that negotiations ought to be based on mutual withdrawal. In the meantime the Communist high command must have agreed on a new tactic: since the Pnom Penh Conference of early March a different version has been advanced, and was immediately taken up and propagated by certain American news media, panel programs, and professors. The Conference, called together by Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia (who had turned to Peking within ten days after Diem’s assassination), was a regular Communist meeting of so-called “neutralist” spokesmen from all of Indochina: Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and of course the two Vietnams.

The terms used and the final resolution show the usual Communist approach: vituperative language against U.S. presence, denunciation of “imperialism, capitalism, colonialism and neo-colonialism,” etc. On the other hand, not a word about the existence of outside Communist aid to the Viet Cong, but friendly encouragement to the newly set up “liberation front” in Thailand. In other words, the objective has been amplified: instead of non-interference in Vietnam, exclusive anti-Americanism; instead of the neutralization of the entire Indochinese peninsula (de Gaulle’s proposal), the frank extension of Communist activities to Thailand, staunch ally of the United States and member of SEATO.

Now one could of course say, repeating a phrase Mr. Herman Reissig used one day in a brochure, that “if the Vietnamese want to live under communism, let them try it.” The tragedy of the situation, however, is that they do not want to live under communism, but that their faith in American protection is fading. In the same proportion, Indochinese leaders are less willing to defy Red China, the great power which will move in after American withdrawal. This is no idle speculation: Mr. McNamara announced eighteen months ago in Saigon that “our boys will be back in the States by Christmas 1965.” It seems now that this was no empty statement, although it was an extremely callous one. The Communists have a long patience; the guerrilla officers, for example, instruct the plantation workers in these terms: “You must work hard for the foreigner so that he may feel secure, make profit and reinvest it. In the end we want to take over well-functioning plantations.” In other words, the enemy does not get discouraged; horrible forebodings are only the share of those who had once fled communism, often by throwing themselves into the sea after the departing boats of the French military.

But let us disregard for the moment the moral aspect, our duty to stand by allies whom we kept reassuring about our intention to stay and give protection. Let us look now at the geo-political situation of Vietnam and Southeast Asia.

After the Second World War the United States replaced Great Britain as a world power on the Seven Seas. It befell to the U.S. Navy and Air Force and to Washington’s foreign policy to keep maritime communication lines open and protect such key areas and passages as the Cape of Good Hope, the Panama and Suez Canals, Singapore and the South China Sea, etc. The vital interest of the mainly land-locked empires of communism is to put their hands on these commercial and strategic sea routes. Note that the Communist enterprise is directed at the points which guard them: Cuba, Egypt, South Africa, and the Indochinese complex with Malaysia and Vietnam. If the latter falls into Communist hands, an encouraged Sukarno will have much less difficulty in fulfilling his promise of crushing Malaysia. (At this writing he demands U.S. cooperation with his plan, confident that he will obtain it as he did in the case of New Guinea.) The Pnom Penh Conference foreshadows that the last Western footholds would then become easy targets. In the not-so-long run Taiwan, the Philippines, even Australia and New Zealand would be threatened; their political and military leaders are increasingly worried and try to strengthen their ties to Washington and London beyond the ordinary SEATO commitments.

We might say that even if Indochina is lost, the Seventh Fleet could operate from its present bases, perhaps also from Indian ones. But the link between China and Indonesia would then be established, and both would be firmly Communist regimes shouting with Sukarno “To hell with American aid!” China would break out of its land-locked position to the Indonesian archipelago, reaching beyond the Philippines all the way to Australia. The South China Sea would turn into a Communist mare nostrum, blocking one of the world’s liveliest waterways.

These consequences are not the upshot of wild dreams or of a panicky way of looking at things. Whatever the future brings, they are inscribed as distinct possibilities in the geo-political situation.
But they are not inscribed in "History," which is after all shaped by men and their decisions. Instead of being hypnotized by war-escalation talk, the U.S. could encourage peace-escalation, that is a systematic strengthening of resistance in the area. One is embarrassed to use always the same self-evident analogy: if Hitler’s aggression had been stopped at the stage of Rhineland occupation, the other conquests in Central Europe—and World War II—would not have followed. If communism is not resisted now in Southeast Asia, it will inevitably spread. The more so when after each act of aggression or violence, such as bombing the U.S. Embassy, they are rewarded by the offer of a billion.

As for the Communists and their sympathizers or dupes, they are not embarrassed by the monotonous use of the same propaganda. The slogans since the Chiang Kai-shek days have not been readjusted: now as then we read in a succession of books and book reviews that the Saigon government is corrupt (show me one in Asia, including Communist governments, which is not), that soldiers desert their units (so did sixty thousand Chinese in Korea who fled south when the prison camps opened), that U.S. advisors on the spot and in Washington lie to the American public—and, finally, that under Ho Chi Minh the North Vietnamese are honest, sober builders of a better world.

The superiority of Jules Roy’s book over the recent ones by Malcolm W. Browne and David Halberstam (not speaking of the Moscow-based Australian Communist, Burchett) is in its human dimensions and dispassionate arguments. Roy has sympathy for both sides, but describes intelligently the military decisions, and goes to the core of strategic errors. Above all, he does not believe that negotiations would have resulted in anything but perhaps a slower Communist take-over.

Roy speaks, however, of distinct possibilities of winning the war—if the French plan had been better conceived and if rivalry at the top had not vitiated the operations. He also mentions the Hanoi-Haiphong line as a “vital artery” that the French could not afford to see weakened but which we now refuse to bomb, as we refused to bomb the hydroelectric installations on the other side of Yalu River.

True, the French were no longer involved when Jules Roy revisited the battlefield and after ten years the entire country is filled with other momentous events, in comparison to which the French wounds at Dienbienphu no longer appeared so deep. The author’s analysis is calmed by the lapse of time. We are still involved; and the outcome does not have to be the same.
VIETNAM: THE BASIC QUESTION

James H. Forest

The most basic question raised by the war in Vietnam is not one of tactics but of war itself. Our problem is not whether to use gas, napalm, phosphorous or defoliants—nor even whether torture should be permitted: it is quite simply whether we should be resorting to arms at all.

I am well aware this question is not new, especially within the religious communities. With a few alterations here and there, the exchange in ancient Rome between Celsus and Origen (debating whether Christians should serve in the army) would be considered timely in any contemporary journal.

Yet if the question is as old as civilization, the situation which confronts us today is relatively new. Because of technological developments in the mechanics of warfare, even George Orwell's social prophecies in 1984 now seem curiously dated. The theological middle-ground of the just war tradition, cultivated by the churches and responsible men for centuries, has been unceremoniously pulled from under us.

The chief difficulty springs from a refocusing of violence in warfare. There was a time when volunteer (at worst, conscript) armies met for battle on the plains, when cross-bows were put aside on holy days, when men made such strange oaths, now only amusing to our ears, as Robert the Pious: "I will not attack noble ladies traveling without husband, nor their maids, nor widows and nuns—unless it is their fault." (Seeds of Destruction by Thomas Merton, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964, p. 150.) All sorts of ecclesiastical restrictions were placed on warfare, including, in the tenth century, a proscribed 40-day penitential fast for anyone who killed an enemy in war, even if the war was considered just.

The shift from combatant-focused violence to the destruction of whole population sectors, whether by defoliating chemicals, is indeed unfortunate that many innocent persons are forced to starve or suffer malnutrition because their crops have been destroyed. Men must eat, but we are at war with men. The arithmetic of war is simple. We must make it as difficult for the Viet Cong to survive as possible.

The same can be said for torture. If you are going to fight this kind of war, against an elusive guerrilla foe, intelligence must be extracted from all those you have reason to suspect know something which might prove vital to the success or failure of your mission. When such information means certainly the life or death of your comrades, even your own life, the means of obtaining it become nothing more than a detail. If that means torture—and indeed it does—these are the wages of war in our time. Regret the fact of war, not that war is ugly and should be made a bit prettier.

Do not react with horror at the effects of defoliating chemicals. It is indeed unfortunate that many innocent persons are forced to starve or suffer malnutrition because their crops have been destroyed. Men must eat, but we are at war with men. The arithmetic of war is simple. We must make it as difficult for the Viet Cong to survive as possible.

Nor should the use of napalm or phosphorous be cause for complaint. It is true that weapons using these particular combustibles burn in a particularly merciless way, leaving little they touch alive. It is true such weapons cannot tell the difference between babies and guerrilla warriors. It is even true that for many months the American government,
apparently wary of public opinion, denied the use of such weapons—until it was no longer possible to do so. Yet what alternative is there? If persons are to be killed, if villages must be destroyed, it would seem obvious that the most effective means available for doing so should be employed. General Sherman, in noting that "war is hell," knew what he was talking about.

It would seem then, to those who continue to uphold the universal right to life of innocent persons, that what is needed in Vietnam is not a new, improved war, but an entirely different approach, one which respects the principle, as one of the Vatican Council fathers put it, "that human life is sacred and must not be taken indiscriminately."

The alternative is not, as some have suggested, to return to the spirit that resulted in Munich, a form of passivity or modern quietism which Gandhi referred to distastefully as the "pacifism of the weak." Gandhi, not at all inclined to let evil triumph, to ignore unpleasant realities or to bow to the threat of force, offered instead what he termed the "pacifism of the strong": satyagraha (truth or love force) or what he called nonviolent resistance.

Not as negative as it sounds, nonviolence has been at the core of numerous causes which at earlier stages in history would have relied upon violent means. We see this in our own civil rights movement, under the pacifist leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, James Farmer, John Lewis, Bayard Rustin et al. It has also been demonstrated in varying degrees elsewhere: in India, certain parts of Africa, in occupied Scandinavia, in Eastern Europe (though in modified ways) under the Soviets.

Two reasons can be given for the great rise of interest in nonviolence. One we have discussed: the advances of weaponry and the resultant changes in the tactics of violence, making violence unacceptable to all those who continue to respect the most fundamental of human values: the inviolability of the lives of the innocent. For them, only one door remains open in the struggle for justice, and that is the door of nonviolence. For still others, nonviolence has always been the only path simply because it was the one which seemed most in keeping with their particular value system. Certainly this is true for many Christians.

How then is nonviolence to be applied in Vietnam? Certainly, as more are agreeing each day, it must begin with negotiations and a cease-fire. Bloodshed must be stopped because it is resolving nothing. Such a suggestion, one happily notes, is in line with those made by Pope Paul, U Thant, President de Gaulle, spokesmen for the World Council of Churches—and perhaps even to some extent our own President, depending upon how seriously he intends to implement the Johns Hopkins speech. At the time of this writing, it remains impossible to tell.

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Negotiations would involve either the United Nations or the 14 nations which created the long-ignored Geneva Accords of 1954. The function of such a conference would be to lay the groundwork for democratic Vietnamese government, but a militarily neutral one (as was intended in the original Accords). No doubt a cooling off period would be necessitated before elections could be held. And certainly U.S. and all other foreign troops would have to be withdrawn. The Vietnamese, notoriously nationalistic people (during their long history they have twice thrown out the Chinese), would certainly welcome the exodus of our military presence, as long as the safety of the refugee population in South Vietnam could be guaranteed to supra-national authorities.

A free election (one has never been held in South Vietnam, though it was one of the principal requirements of the 1954 Accords) would be held at the earliest possible date. The interim government would of course be a coalition of the existing political factions, but probably such a coalition should be made responsible to the same supra-national authority which takes responsibility for the welfare of the refugee population.

One final key point: While certainly withdrawal of the American military is a basic requirement in Vietnam, it would seem obvious that a drastically increased program of nonmilitary economic aid is required. We are already on the verge of notable success with the Mekong River Delta Project (a TVA-like program carried out under United Nations auspices) which will directly affect approximately 20 million people in four nations—Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam (both North and South). Quite possibly Vietnam would welcome the constructive presence of such "forces" as our own Peace Corps. The possibilities, in fact, are ultimately limited only by our intelligence and ability to make the financial investment required. It is difficult to believe, how-

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ever, that without even increasing our present rate of investment for military ends (nearly $2 million per day), we would ultimately find a much more advantageous ending to the adventure we have embarked on in Vietnam than is presently in view.

**ETHICS IN THE DIRTY WAR**

*Alan Geyer*

In the days following President Johnson's April 7 Vietnam policy speech at Johns Hopkins University, it has seemed more difficult than ever to gain a morally secure vantage point from which to view American involvement in that "dirty and brutal and difficult war."

There was a chorus of acclamation which included U Thant, the leaders of many nations, and a generous press. Joseph Alsop credited the President with a "great speech" of "noble aims, high aspirations, and warmly humane feelings," the high point of which was the quotation from Deuteronomy: "I call heaven and earth to record this day against you, that I have set before you life and death. . . ."

Several days later, the morning mail brought the simultaneous complaints of *Human Events* and the Fellowship of Reconciliation against Mr. Johnson. The former charged that the President’s speech "smacked of appeasement" because it failed to insist on victory over the Communist aggressors; that his proposal for a U.N.-sponsored development program in Southeast Asia "smacked of tribute to the Reds"; and that he was wrong to display a "readiness to negotiate even while the Reds hold vast areas of South Vietnamese territory."

The F.O.R., in the name of 2,700 ministers, priests, and rabbis, attacked the President from the opposite flank: "Mr. President: in the name of God, STOP IT!" The clergymen excoriated "the moral bankruptcy of our present policy" which is "unworthy either of the high standards of our common religious faith, or of the lofty aspirations on which this country was founded." An appeal was made for a conference with Red China and for the withdrawal of American troops. The church leaders wanted the Vietnamese to retain the right of "self-determination" but assumed that American withdrawal would be more likely to guarantee that right than to surrender it to Communist power.

There are many obstacles in the way of sound moral judgments concerning Vietnamese policy, not the least of which is the infinite complexity of Vietnam itself. An unbelievably tangled ethnic and religious predicament, a multiform geography, uncertain and unstable borders, a government of doubtful legitimacy and precarious tenure, an imbroglio of international law, a labyrinth of great-power interests and machinations, and a warfare of unexcelled elusiveness and unceasing quandary—this is Vietnam today. Nowhere has the world demanded of the moralist more modesty of pronouncement or more patience in understanding. The strident voices of both hawks and doves in the American public typically betray a lack of diligent homework in seeking to comprehend the historical situation in Southeast Asia.

Nothing is more inimical to fruitful ethical discussion than an over-confident reading of competing claims as to the historical facts. American debate over Vietnam has not simply been afflicted with moral extremism; it has been plagued with pretensions to knowledge of the situation. All too often, these pretensions have been combined with the charge that the government is suppressing the "true story" of what is going on in Indochina.

That there are some official barriers to freedom of the press, imposed by both American and Vietnamese authorities, is one of the inevitable and regrettable concomitants of war. That there have been arbitrary, unnecessary, and sometimes bungling information policies in both Washington and Saigon may well be true. But this is not the major explanation for public ignorance: that explanation is more to be sought in the lack of American experience in Southeast Asia, the tiny coterie of authentic area experts, the headline habits of the press, and the apathy of an affluent society which even infects churchmen and scholars who, periodically, must express moral indignation about *something* if they are to continue to enjoy their creature comforts.

Let us note some of the major disputes as to *fact* which account, in part, for the clash of moral opinion. Some say that the war in Vietnam is essentially a civil war between the Saigon regime and the Viet Cong. If this premise be granted, moral argumentation tends to proceed thusly: (1) There has been a failure of the Saigon government to meet the needs of the peasants. (2) The government has ruthlessly suppressed legitimate opposition. (3) The ruling elite is corrupted by the largesse of American aid. (4) American military power has been enlisted in a fu-
tile and fratricidal war. Therefore (5) the U.S. should withdraw its support of the Saigon regime; certainly there is no justification for bombing the North Vietnamese since the real conflict is indigenous to the South.

But what if, having granted the many shortcomings of the Saigon government, the original premise is invalid and the warfare is essentially an onslaught of aggression and subversion directed and supported by the North, exploiting as it may the legitimate grievances of villagers in the South? What if it is both unrealistic and unfair to expect such a harassed government to establish instant democracy, with tolerance for opposition and enlightened social policies? This happens to be the position of the administration and it was impressively documented in the White Paper of February 25, which began with the sentence: "South Vietnam is fighting for its life against a brutal campaign of terror and armed attack inspired, directed, supplied and controlled by the Communist regime in Hanoi."

If this alternative premise be accepted, it makes much less sense to promise "self-determination" to the people of South Vietnam by abandoning them to the aggressor. The policy of the Johnson Administration then may not seem to be so "morally bankrupt" (to refer again to the unreconciliatory language of the Fellowship of Reconciliation), but rather a resolute acceptance of bitter and ugly realities and an unflinching determination to protect a victimized people.

Another morally loaded dispute as to the facts concerns the prospects for meaningful negotiations. For months, enthusiasts for negotiation have produced very hopeful reports as to the desire of the Chinese, Ho Chi Minh, and/or the Russians for a settlement at the conference table rather than upon the battlefield. "Reliable sources" in Paris, London, at the U.N. and elsewhere have "detected" a Communist readiness to end the war by negotiation. These sources have inflamed the hopes of many churchmen and students that the war could be stopped by a willingness of the U.S. to stop fighting and start talking.

American policy-makers have persistently denied that there were any indications that the Communists would prefer talking to fighting. The spurning by Hanoi, Peking, and Moscow of President Johnson's belated bid for unconditional negotiations, as well as their rejection of mediation bids by U Thant and Gordon Walker, would seem to substantiate the administration's case that there is no basis for a conference at the present time. (One could only hope, at this writing, that the Reds' hostile response to the Johns Hopkins address is a ritualized rejection which could conceivably give way to face-saving negotiations over "the Cambodian problem" or "the Laotian problem" which would really eventuate in serious talks about Vietnam.)

The "reliable sources" are thus far obliged to acknowledge that they have failed to make good on their claims that the Vietnamese war is negotiable. There is little doubt that the conference table is a more humane area of conflict than the battlefield, at least for the participants themselves—but it is fatuous to assume that the United States can simply make that choice for itself. It takes two to tango. As the President put it at Baltimore: "The infirmities of man are such that force must often precede reason—and the waste of war, the works of peace. We wish this were not so. But we must deal with the world as it is, if it is ever to be as we wish."

Nevertheless, our government for months paid an unnecessary high price politically for its view of the war's negotiability. It permitted much of the world to gain the impression that the U.S. didn't really want to negotiate, whatever the prospects might be. While the moral style of Johnson and Rusk differs in major ways from that of Eisenhower and Dulles a decade ago, the present administration has unfortunately repeated the grave error of seeming unwilling to trust itself in any negotiations. It might have been wiser for the President and the Secretary to have said long ago, in effect: "We are not very optimistic about the desire of Hanoi and Peking to negotiate with us and we have our doubts as to the utility of talks at this time, but representatives of our government are available at any time to sit down with representatives of their government in order to explore every possibility of a peaceful settlement." The Johns Hopkins address finally approached such an attitude, but it came only after a very long period during which many non-Communists, including a lively segment of our own public, honestly doubted the government's willingness to seek a peaceful settlement.

Just now there are conflicting items of evidence
concerning the fortunes of the war itself. Here, too, the moral equation is more a function of the facts themselves than some persons recognize. If the U.S.-Saigon forces seem to be losing the war, there are almost irresistible temptations to scapegoat, or to see the situation as one of providential judgment, or to question the propriety of continued American involvement. (Some pacifists exhibit a perverse eagerness to find evidence of military failure.) The daily reports of casualties and downed helicopters and planes and terrorist bombings and ambushes tend to load the scale against continuation of the war, whatever the overall picture may be.

If other reports may be believed, there has lately been a significant improvement in the effectiveness of the military struggle against the Communists. The morale and efficiency of South Vietnamese forces have ameliorated greatly, according to American reporters. The government of neighboring Laos has stabilized and has cooperated fully in an increasingly effective "secret war" against North Vietnamese supply lines to both the Pathet Lao and the Viet Cong, according to a veteran Australian correspondent. A French neutralist back in Paris from a tour with the Viet Cong states that the new U.S. bombing policy is seriously weakening the strength of the guerrillas and is deflating the confidence of the Hanoi regime. A Canadian journalist writes from Peking that the Chinese, notwithstanding the virulence of their anti-American propaganda, appear to intend no provocations which would escalate the war and are maintaining an essentially defensive rather than offensive military posture.

Yet doubts are justifiable, too. The effectiveness of conventional anti-aircraft guns and obsolete Communist aircraft has surprised and embarrassed American officers. The installation of Russian SAM-sites may make any assaults in the Hanoi-Haiphong area terribly costly; this, along with the threats of both Chinese and Russian "volunteers," may also suggest that one of our major political strategies, the induction of pluralism in the Communist world, may be undermined by military tactics which require a solidarity of Communist response. Temporary discouragement of the North Vietnamese may mask a hardening and embittered resolve to persevere; previous wars do not provide convincing evidence that air bombardment is an effective solvent of the public will of an enemy. And nobody claims that air attacks can completely seal off the border between North and South. It would be a grotesque and dubious matter indeed if the justifications for continued bombing of the North should be reduced to maintaining the morale of the South and holding together the dangerously hardened consensus in the American body politic—this would surely represent an in-verted and perverted kind of psychological warfare.

Which set of facts best describes the military situation? Who can claim to know? We may discount the absolute certitude which both hawks and doves bring to their interpretation of the Vietnamese struggle. And we can afford at least a small measure of trust in the conduct of our own government unless we have convincing evidence that that trust should be withheld altogether. Too many Americans of the warmongering right and the peacemongering left share a common disposition to react with moral cynicism and political bigotry to almost anything their government does in the realm of foreign policy.

This is not to suggest that there can be any complacency concerning the ethical qualities of our involvement in Vietnam.

If our economic and military assistance has succeeded in preserving a measure of freedom for more than a decade, it has nevertheless failed to do justice to the social revolution, it has helped to corrupt both old and new classes, and it has created an unfortunate degree of dependence upon continuing aid.

If there can be righteous indignation about the ruthlessness of Viet Cong tactics, there must be more than sorrow at the degree of terror and torture which the Saigon regime itself has employed.

If the physical properties of the "riot gases" supplied by the United States are more humane than guns and bombs, it is yet evident that responsible officials lacked a "decent respect for the opinions of mankind" concerning the crossing of the moral threshold into chemical warfare.

If it is fair to charge repeatedly that the Communists have violated the Geneva agreements of 1954 and 1962, it should be acknowledged candidly that the U.S. and South Vietnam have violated those same agreements and, at times, have sought to excuse themselves on the grounds that they never signed the 1954 accords—which may be judged a disingenuous appeal to a double standard.

If it is wise to question the present capacity of the U.N. to rally peacekeeping forces and to tame the hostility of Peking and Hanoi, it is cause for the gravest concern that the U.S. has done so little to seek a multilateral legitimacy for its intervention and may fairly be questioned as to its presumptuousness in playing policeman for the world community.
If there are praiseworthy and disinterested dimensions in the American presence in Indochina, it must be acknowledged that official spokesmen have given contradictory accounts of our motivation. (In May 1964, Adlai Stevenson told the U.N. Security Council: "The United States has no, repeat no, national military objective anywhere in Southeast Asia." In the same month, the Department of State published a policy paper which stated: "Southeast Asia has great strategic significance in the forward defense of the United States.")

The great word in contemporary ethics is "ambiguity." The Vietnamese case profusely illustrates the ambiguities of international conflict. Yet it is against this background of ambiguities that President Johnson's speech at Johns Hopkins deserves to be saluted for its ethical virility. There is a candor about the causes of present tensions confronting the U.S.: "It may be because we are rich, or powerful—or because we have made mistakes—or because they honestly fear our intentions." There is an openness to a variety of forms of peaceful settlement: "in discussion or negotiation with the government concerned; in large groups or in small ones; in the reaffirmation of old agreements or their strengthening with new ones." There is a recognition of human solidarity among "the ordinary men and women of North Vietnam and South Vietnam—of China and India—or Russia and America." There is a generous and politically courageous proposal for "a billion-dollar American investment" through the United Nations for cooperative development in which the Communists would be permitted to share.

Yet there is a steadfast commitment to the freedom of South Vietnam from attack. There is the expectation that armed conflict may persist for a long time. And there is the sober warning that retreat from Vietnam would simply set the stage for aggression in other countries with ultimately more devastation and suffering. Surely there is abundant evidence from twentieth century history that "the appetite of aggression is never satisfied."

We have entered upon a time of waiting in Southeast Asia. No man is entitled to predict with certitude whether the "dirty and brutal war" will drag on for months and years to come, or escalate into a yet more terrible struggle, or subside into effective negotiations. There is a great gulf fixed between the minds of Western democrats and Asian Communists—a gulf which makes mutual trust all but impossible and which stretches both policy and prophecy beyond the limits of rational intelligence. If negotiations come soon enough, many of the inadequacies of American intervention may be forgotten; President Johnson, Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, and Maxwell Taylor may be vindicated as both wise and moral men and the world may dream again of peace. If Hanoi and Peking continue their refusal to negotiate unconditionally and American bombers continue their northward progress toward Hanoi, the dreaded collision-course may be run out to our horror—and then all the decisions and all the policies of nations will once again seem to be filled with folly.

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