

MISSION TO HANOI

Daniel Berrigan

I am setting this down on February 26th as the reverberations of our trip seem to be subsiding. I want also to pay a certain ironic tribute to the visit and presence of a State Department official who arrived here this afternoon and treated me to an hour and a half of small talk and double talk. He is so young, and so completely cut to the bureaucratic cloth, that I found him excelling beyond praise in the old game of which Socrates spoke. That is to say, he is skilled at making the worse cause appear the better.

He was able to assure me with the utmost conviction and steady gaze, which must have originated in Tom Swift novels, (1) that I had nothing "new or interesting" to bring from Hanoi, and (2) that I could have exerted a "powerful and primary influence" upon North Vietnamese if only I had been able to convey the American urgency that the killing would stop.

Now these are indeed noble sentiments, and one must make serious note of them. The difficulty is, of course, that they are expressed in an atmosphere of absolute war supremacy and conscious war applications of technology. But the real difficulty with myself goes deeper than this. It has simply to do with the fact that I have seen the victims. And this sight, of the mutilated dead, has exerted such inward change upon me that the words of corrupt diplomacy appear to me more and more in their true light. In their true light, that is to say, as words spoken in enmity against reality. And that, of course, is a very old and well-specified sin, especially in a biblical tradition.

I must insist upon the contrast; indeed, the contrast between the facts of Hanoi and the words of Washington is very nearly the only weaponry that the Peace Movement can claim. And it does very little good, in the task of getting at the truth, to claim that the Peace Movement is interested only in those black and white contrasts set up by a prevenient conscience which has immunized itself against the coarse facts of life. The point is, I would think, that those in this move-

In February of this year Daniel Berrigan, S.J. of Cornell University and Howard Zinn, professor of government at Brandeis University, made a trip to Hanoi to obtain the release of three American prisoners of war. On that trip Father Berrigan made notes which, on his return, he put in the form which appears here. This is the first of two installments.

ment who would rate highest according to intelligence, candor, and passion for truth, have been exposed not to the fictions of black and white but to the facts of life and death. A very different matter indeed.

I could indeed, at risk of personal cruelty, make large capital out of the exchange with my friend this evening. But apart from cruelty, the reflections would lead us far from the point. The truth is that the rhetoric of the State Department leaves one cold — with the cold of death itself. Their language is increasingly narcissistic; it persuades no one but themselves. And even in the process of self-persuasion, one sees that flickering of the eye and turning aside from one's inquiring gaze which bespeaks so deep an alienation from that acceptance of truth which equates acceptance of self. So I had rather say most simply that the powers and dominations of D.C. have no power over me and are increasingly withdrawing from power positions around American lives. The nation is in the process of what may be described as the most profound spiritual turmoil in its history. And it is the fate of a little, broken, unbreakable Asian nation which is working this enormous change in the spiritual constitution of the Western giant — although the meek shall inherit the earth or at least that portion of the earth which destiny and their own bloodletting and their own unkillable sense of history and the rightness of cosmic ecology have allotted to them.

(I am going to try as carefully as I can in what follows to be true to the rather hectic and desultory notes taken in the process of our trip. I shall be most careful to the literal text when it comes to what I consider important exchanges with interesting men. And in the broader issues and in the larger meetings and experiences I shall try to rely upon a combination of the text before me and my own reflections at present.)

Vientiane, Laos, February 8th. We are on the eve of what promises to be our departure on that last, impossible flight into the North. Like that single inch which completes a seven-league leap. Can it be true that in going to face these prisoners of war we are truly leading them from prison? Or are we rather not leading them from a physical prison back to a prison society? And are Zinn and myself of such quality that we can truly free others? And are they of such

spiritual capacity as to be enabled to become free men?

Or are we doing something different? Are we bringing children by the hand from one prison into a larger prison yard? What account will they have to tell us of their selves? And if they have grown into free men, what alternative would be truly open to them except to desert, to condemn the war, and to reject once and for all the slavery that hems them in?

It has struck me: we are going on to a mission, to free or to initially invite into freedom, our own society. It occurs to me beyond any doubt that Americans are "prisoners of war," locked in our dungeons of illusion, of fear, of hatred and contempt and joylessness; all hearing the closure in our faces of the hinge of fate, strangers to our own history, to moral passion, to the neighbor, strangers to the immense and vagrant and splendid mysteries of life itself, the forms of community that await "the trial of peace," of men who have never advocated formal and legalized murder as a method of social change. How will new men be born, except they will to be born.

Vientiane. *Ecco*, the troubled duet enters. Troubled because the same system that lays the wall-to-wall carpet and installs the air conditioner in the embassy office and welcomes us in a civilized way—that same system rains horror and death on the innocent some 300 miles away. Such reflections must occur; they save us once and for all from captivation by pure motives. The truth is that Zinn and I are tolerated because we hold the myth captive by its short hairs. Only the despised Peace people, the dubious Americans, the vilified and imprisoned, can save their friends. Once we pushed beyond the border it becomes clear that power is powerless, that all the king's army and all the king's men cannot accomplish what we are setting out to do. So our powerlessness is now — at least for a time — a source of immense power. With the government and with the "enemy" tread carefully. . . .

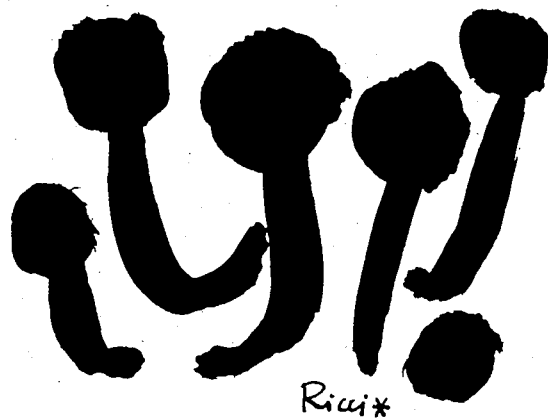
The old purgatorial myths of detention, purification, and joyous release. Here we sit by the waters of the Mekong. But how shall we sing the songs of Israel in a strange land? Awaiting the airplane, awaiting the prisoners, awaiting ourselves. Like Kafka shadows, waiting for their counterparts. How can we become ourselves except we undergo that final journey, its passage granted to us by the "enemy," its provisions cut to the bone. Item: Cheap trousers, one Hong Kong shirt washed by night and worn by day, three non-matching socks or pairs of socks, sandals, two jockey shorts. Come, Abraham, into a land which I will show you. You may yet enter the

absurd ark of covenant, the old airplane; it may yet lumber into the air and likely as a grand piano. . . .

Meantime our thoughts are increasingly sober. The mission is calculated to outrage some on both sides. There will be activists, dry-as-bones and incapable of compassion, who will score us for selling out to the military. Then, some of the hawks, whose eye and claw are sharpened mightily these days, will descend upon us for not going into Hanoi with our passports honor bright. But, I say, a plague alike on peregrine and pigeon. We will harken to our own drummer. . . .

We went together to the Chinese Embassy to begin conversations about alternative routes from Vientiane to Hanoi. Perhaps it was possible, as our British airlines assured us, to travel through Peking. GRRR!—or whatever the dragons say through their teeth. Contempt. Xenophobia. A small payment for the long-compounded injury of maltreatment, "yellow peril," encirclement, overflights, and exclusion from the world community, etc., etc.

We also went to the North Vietnamese Embassy. The men there could not have been more courteous. Their way is hard and small and gentle. We came for permission to enter Hanoi during a week of humiliation of the Allies. Westmoreland had announced his usual body count. He is perhaps the most persevering big-and-little-game hunter of the century. The little men sip hot tea with us, and except for one brief flash of triumph were too polite to count our body losses. Time has gone over to their side, in the night. . . .



We took off from Vientiane for Hanoi at 5:19 p.m. on Friday, the ninth of February. Our aircraft was described hopefully as a Boeing 707, about thirty years old. Our flight was half filled, both children and civilians; Poles, Indians and finally ourselves.

Five minutes after takeoff. The Mekong is below, a vast sprawl of placid water whose sleepy god is placated by messy little shrines like pigeon cages along the banks. Like the Mississippi the Mekong is

capable of blindly breaking out in floods. Now, where it crooks in a great elbow in mid-Vientiane, there lies a great golden bar of sand. Like the aftermath of a gesture of creation.

Below, the rice fields, the primitive villages. A misty tranquil day, in a country whose changes in light and temperature are never large. At 10,000 feet altitude we can still see the huts at the center of the fields, the demarcations going outward like cracks in a crystal. O doux pays! . . .

Darkness. The lights are flashing from the ground outside. Howard (my cherished brother and friend and Old Testament man of heart and guts), is deep in converse in his delicious fractured French with a passenger up ahead. The old craft, shaking in every rivet, like a clay duck before the trap shooters, the war-game experts.

The first lights of Hanoi; 7:15 p.m. the runway. Easy down. The lights of the anti-aircraft nest shine full upon us; "Just checking, bud." So we came in.

How convey the atmosphere of that long and dolorous entrance to the destroyed city, the endless pontoons of the bridges replacing the bombed bridges of months ago; the desolation and patience and cold; the convoys, the endless lines of military vehicles and cars. As usual the loveliest fact of all was the most elusive and insignificant: we had been received by flowers.

We were ushered, around 9:30, into the austere Napoleonic Deluxe of the "Hotel of Reunification." We were instructed, "Sleep well."

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Saturday a.m. Alarm. We went to sleep like children and awakened like adults to the boom! boom! like the guns of an Indian summer, courtesy of our Air Force. Howard appeared at my door, disheveled and primary in the half light, like a runner awaiting the gun, without his socks forsooth. In a few moments, after we had crossed the garden and ducked into the shelter, he was decently covered by a German who placed his own rubber coat over those extensive and defenseless lower limbs.

Later, from my room, I could hear the chambermaids in the corridor, singing the plaintive atonal music with which the meek of heart console themselves for life in a cave with ravaging lions.

Life under Big Brother's shadow seems to awaken the submerged virtues — courtesy, cheerfulness of spirit. I think of the accounts of wartime London and the instinctive sharing of food and space. When we climbed out of the garden tomb this morning, a boy had a pair of sandals waiting for each of us.

Saturday, February 10th. How is one to convey the

atmosphere of a city rendered strange by the mythology of our words, of distance, of bonds? It was like stepping out upon the threshold of a planet, and then trying to report back to those whose lives and history and future had wedded them to earth. The city was bitterly cold. And enormously silent. One could stand upon a corner and hear with closed eyes the vast whisper, as though of a great loom, the weaving of distances accomplished by the wheels of hundreds upon hundreds of bicycles. Almost no motors in the whole city. A bicycle for every third person. It was as though in a cave of creation whose over-arching sky was one of protective darkness, a new creation was in its first stages. History was being woven of a people that refused to die.

The city awakened as early as five a.m. to cold and the usual privations of a city under the bombs. We noticed people going off by the thousands to work, pausing only to stop at one of the workers' restaurants for a bowl of rice and a cup of scalding tea. Indeed, rice and tea are the blood of life itself. We learned later how the government had made its pledge of honor that no one should be deprived of his ration of rice; that in accord with this pledge there were no middle men between the farmers and the consumers. It was literally a line of life between those responsible for the conduct of the war and those whose perseverance and energy were supplying the stuff of war itself, and indeed of survival.

We passed at least three open book stores. By seven o'clock in the morning the young people were gathered in great numbers in front of a cinema; when the doors opened they pushed in as vigorously as if they stood in New York or London or Paris. It was an early showing of a film before work began. The blank walls of the second and third floors are covered with slogans and pictures, done in the crude realistic Russian manner, of heroes of the war spewing forth great slogans of victory and reconciliation and peace. In a corner showcase was displayed the attaché case of someone who had been burned to death in a northern bombing raid.

We wanted badly to wander by ourselves, but it was explained to us that the location of the shelters made it difficult, and in any case we could be picked up by the militia since we were without identification.

Saturday a.m. Our first impression is taken from an early morning walk in the streets of Hanoi. People look at us with a certain curiosity, but we have yet to see on a single face marks of animosity.

The hotel is bloody cold and damp. For breakfast: café au lait, two eggs and good bread and butter and apricot jam. I slept in ski underwear and socks and was quite comfortable. A good breakfast. I tend to

eat more on the road than I would at home.

Hanoi workers seem to start their work at dawn; there is much bustling about and singing. Such a delight. Everyone asked about Philip on our arrival and was delighted to know he was my brother.

The four guides who met with us this morning are undoubtedly the same who will be with us for the rest of the week. They seem businesslike and sophisticated, speak good English, and told us that they learned the language by themselves. It is the same group that met Muste, Dellinger, Hayden, and in fact all the Americans who have come here so far. They also were the group who went recently to Haiphong to meet the Phoenix.

I have an idea that they are not so much a "peace group" in the American sense as a liaison group between the government and exchanges. Their political savvy and their knowledge of governments and other cultures lead me to believe that this group is an important training ground for future political leaders. At least it is hard for me to see how these young fellows, most of whom began their adolescence with resistance groups against the French, could be anything but the leaders of tomorrow in their country.

After breakfast we met with them for the first extended exchange. They seemed quite courteous but much to the point. They wished to present a program for the week and to hear our reactions.

We began with a question. Zinn or myself asked: What is the idea of the government of North Vietnam in releasing these three men? Can you give us some light, beyond the mere announcement of the fact and of their names which we read about in the *New York Times*? (I reproduce here rather the sense than the exact wording of their response. Our difficulties were rather great with their French and English, so we lapsed into a kind of mishmash of Vietnamese-French-English translation.)

They say they are trying to educate the pilots so that when they return to the United States they will be good citizens, and give up the dark thinking of clichés. They are being released so that they will become good fathers and husbands. These pilots had, as a matter of fact, committed great crimes against Vietnam. The act of release is being initiated by the sovereign Vietnamese people; but it is not separate from the good relations and the task of building understanding with the people of the United States. Indeed, if we compare these men with those who have burned draft cards in the United States, there is a great gap in ideology. It is not easy to convince these men of a new way; a way of patient explanation is required.

Will your committee at home demand publicly that these men not return again to bomb North Vietnam? Can you act upon them, and upon other soldiers, in somewhat the way you have been able to persuade large numbers of young Americans not to go to war? Because if they should return again to our country and fight here they would have to be punished again. Is it possible, though, that such prisoners should eventually do something for the anti-war movement in the United States?

But you understand that even if nothing of our hopes should happen through these men, relations between you and us remain the same. But we do suggest that your committee in the United States should raise its voice, so that if these released men should return to Vietnam to fight, against all our hopes and our sense of the rightness of things, no harm will be done to the mutual confidence existing between your movement and ours.

(The above paragraph expresses, of course, a strange mixture of naïveté and human confidence. It is always a great deal more difficult to convey the taste and atmosphere of these exchanges to rather more sophisticated and war-weary American compatriots. But we were dealing with men who evidently had not lost all hope in the decency of the American public; a phenomenon which, it struck us, is somewhat more rare at home than it was here.)

They asked us at this point to express our requests with regard to exchanges in Hanoi during the following week. We spoke of our hopes of speaking with scholars and intellectuals and students, with people of villages, with city workers, and with representatives of the Catholic community. Zinn added his wishes that this would extend to government officials and political leaders. I am slowly getting a better sense of the identity of our hosts, the members of the peace commission. There is one graduate of the teachers' college, at present teaching, two professors, and one practicing musician.

The streets of Hanoi are like a vast billboard; the same types of banners that are shown in the photos and newsreels from China are evidently very popular here. We asked them to translate the dominant notes of the messages strung across city streets and emblazoned on the walls of buildings. It seemed to come down to: Congratulations to our brothers of the National Liberation Front for their brilliant victories of the past two weeks in South Vietnam.

A lovely lake marks the center of the city. At its heart is a small island crowned with an ancient medieval pagoda. The further end of the lake had been a target of bombing some months before, and a number of children had been killed there. But the marks

of the raid seemed pretty well erased. All kinds of trifles — pocket combs, mirrors, shoelaces, plastic utensils, caps and hats and socks and handkerchiefs — were on sale at a streetcar stop at the far end of the lake as we rounded it. And all along the lake, as we were to notice elsewhere, the potholes of individual shelters, each of them with its cover neatly laid half on and half off, like a teapot ready for a family gathering. And then the communal bunkers, thrown up from soil and debris laid over concrete shells. I climbed into one of them and got the feeling that I used to sense as a child in the root cellar on the farm: a smell of damp, a sense of the absolute cold that lies at the heart of things.

The hotel atmosphere is something else again. Evidently it was built toward the end of the last century or the beginning of this one, a kind of mausoleum of halycon French hopes. Now it is filled with bustling, sternfaced, silent East Germans, Czechs, Hungarians and Cubans. As far as amenities are concerned, there is a rather desolate looking bar at one end of the lobby, several knots of chairs and divans from an affluent era, several beautiful potted miniature trees, the garish neon lighting overhead, and a sense that somehow niceties are being kept up to the limit of the peoples' resources when the realest issue of all is simply survival or extinction.

All in all, I think they are doing extraordinarily well at the things that matter. One has only to summon the atmosphere of a typical public day in New York City, the fever and violence and pace, in order to question the meaning of human resources and the esprit of both cultures.

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A visit to the Museum of the Revolution. It was a surprisingly clever and thoughtful visual assembly of photos, dioramas and wall prints giving some sense of the tortured history of North Vietnam since its pre-Christian days. A heavy atmosphere upon the horrifying omnipresence of violence and invasions.

Item: A twelfth century Vietnamese prince evolved a book of principles of warfare against the invading Mongolians. Three principles: (1) place the human considerations above the tactical; (2) place flexibility above strength; (3) prepare for a long struggle. I thought that such a book must have been an important source for Mao and Debray and Fanon. It would be interesting to pursue this. . . .

After supper, an invitation to view a film on the life of Uncle Ho. The film came through quite well. It conveyed the spirit of his life with the people, with no heavy hand. A life came through, cut to the bone, the life of a peasant, a man with nothing to sell except

his capacity for living for others. A little unsettling, not merely to realize that this is within the capabilities of this people at this time of their struggle, but that it might well convey a profound sense of things. Quite Gandhian in spirit. Imagine the Pope or Johnson or Kennedy moving among the poor in such a way, allowing spiritual forces to be liberated so that one's whole life was showed new confidence.

I catch myself wondering at times what will be the music I march to on my return? One must be modest even in his expectation of defeat. Will the church and the public, with their incurable middle-of-the-road stance and their American mythology of prisoners, accept the larger meaning of this trip? Will they tolerate my saying what I think must be said about this people? We shall see.

This morning we were given a big packet of books as a gift. Most of them seem, on cursory look, to be beyond my capacity and sympathy; jejune though touching, of a peoples' conviction, which need not be very subtle or well articulated in order to be genuine. But the one book which touches me most is the copy of the Ho Poems in Prison. (We saw the original of the book in the Museum of the Revolution today. It is touchingly bound by hand, and preserved under glass. The characters, as I noticed, were Chinese. Evidently he used those characters in order to keep the manuscript from being confiscated in China. Over and over again one sees how it is a fact of human nature that one must have his saints and relics.) It seems to me that only a true revolutionary would keep a diary in the form of poems. Probably the writing of this book in prison, plus the experience of living in a cave and in exile on his return, were truly a point of no return for Ho. "Lenin Mountain" and "Marx Stream"—so he named the points in nature that correspond to his change of soul. And I think of Jesus in the desert and Loyola in Manresak Cave, then I think of Matthew Goodman, his passion of ecological balance and his death on the Vermont mountain. And how else shall a man construct his soul, except he put on the universe for a body? Often it seems that exile and prison are the twin foci of inward renewal. The lake in the middle of Hanoi, the flower gardens, and the island floating like an open flower—all are parts of a great truth.

The only hateful or suspicious reaction we have met with has not been from the crowds in the streets. It was the face of a single foreigner of unknown vintage which I remember with a kind of fear. He encountered us in front of the hotel and acted as though he could have struck us down with satisfaction.

When I saw in the museums the darts and traps and homemade guns (one was a submachine gun

made from railroad ties and modeled on the type Capone was making famous at the same time in Chi) I thought then with absolute conviction that this was not for me, any more than were the planes and missiles of the Americans. In both cases death, wounds, torture, poison. Though I must admit that the sight of our friends here gives me more hope of control and integration of death than does our public experience at home. Is it possible that men may even violently defend an ideal, and in so doing come to moral superiority as human beings, despite the blood they have shed? Is such a thing only the old lie in a new guise? Truly, the present visit sharpens the debate on violence, instead of solving it. . . .

Tonight they put an old electric heater in my room somewhat like the one we used to have to "take the chill off" in the rooms at home some thirty years ago. It chatters and sputters; the connection is faulty. One dares not get into bed with the thing going. Outside, there are flashes of noise like summer thunder, the sound of anti-aircraft at some distance.

The French in Vietnam. They were able to raise

perhaps the most formidable cultural epoch of modern times here and in Asia and Africa. Something like Egypt and Greece in their own day. Yet I have never felt full in my face such a furnace blast of hatred against any nation as I have felt here against the French. Was the Old Testament right? Are Babylon and Tyre raised inevitably on the mortise of a victim's bones?

What Christians have to offer, both to assailants and victims, is a decision to go to the heart of the conflict, not as a solution of force but as a solution of non-force. If this is a Gandhian insight, so much the better.

Instructions for return. Develop for the students the meaning of Ho's "useless years." The necessity of escaping once and for all the slavery of "being useful." On the other hand, prison, contemplation, life of solitude. Do the things that even "movement people" tend to despise and misunderstand.

To be radical is *habitually* to do things which society at large despises.

[To be concluded.]

THE CONTEMPORARY CRISIS AND THE WILL OF AMERICA

James V. Schall

These past years have rung with growing clashes of arms and men. Surely we can observe with more than literary justice that our generation is filled with wars and rumors of war, with violence, strife and hatred. Even though psychologically and spiritually we pass from Nigeria to Palestine to Vietnam to China, and even to Detroit, we are uneasily aware that the scope of unrest today is both world-wide and of universal significance. No one can long remain objective and calm in the face of our news media which make the whole planet so visible before us. We are often tempted to wish that Asian news still had to be sent to San Francisco via a slow-moving clipper ship rather than via instantaneous radio and television. Yet, the clipper ship is gone; there is no escape from

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where we are. This is the world we have made. And though we all indulge in it at times, there is more than a touch of escapism — secular and pious — in prolonged lamentation about the gravity of our earthly crisis.

Mankind likes to believe that its problems and hopes are of the highest significance. If our contemporary failures and uncertainties are any inverse indication of our potential worth, as they are, we can readily believe that the nature of the world is such that men are not long permitted to ignore their basic human condition and problems, are not allowed to be indifferent to man's true situation without tragic consequences to someone. This is another way of saying that men are responsible for their activities both for good and for evil, that there is a profound wisdom in holding precisely man responsible in some sense for his situation.

What, then, is our world like? The responses are sometimes little short of amazing. "Holy, holy, holy,