A WAY OUT OF VIETNAM?

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In their attempts to discourage dissenting members of the public from attempting (in the Jeffersonian tradition) to influence our policy in Vietnam, apologists for our government’s policy frequently state that the situation in Vietnam and its background are too complicated for the general public to understand and comment on. This is not the case. If one disregards the many misrepresentations of the situation widely disseminated by our own government since 1965 and sticks to the plain facts, the degree of blame which we must shoulder becomes quite clear, as those who have followed the course of events with close attention are aware. They need not be rehearsed here.

A special ploy of the apologists, however, does call for brief comment. This is their emphasis on the importance of our honoring the commitments which several of our presidents have made to South Vietnam. Much stress is placed on “national honor” (one of the most prolific causes of international wars since the emergence of nation states at the close of the Middle Ages). If we fail to adhere strictly to these sacred commitments, it is said, no nation will ever again place any faith in the word of the United States, and we shall lose all our prestige and influence.

Keeping one’s promises is, to be sure, as admirable a quality for nations as for individuals, but we should have thought of that earlier because all the commitments we made to South Vietnam conflicted with prior commitments that we had made (e.g., in the Charter of the United Nations and in the statement issued separately by our representative at the conclusion of the Geneva Conference in 1954) and which we were similarly bound to honor. In other words, our commitments to South Vietnam were never valid because they were precluded by the existence of prior conflicting commitments.

In 1969 President Nixon inherited the very difficult situation created by the previous administration, with the Paris peace talks stalled at dead center and our delegates, because of the false premises upon which our policy had been based, finding little room in which to negotiate. The North Vietnamese were in a better position because they could base their stand firmly on the Geneva Agreements and could logically demand, as they have been doing, that we remove all our troops from Vietnam, since they are there in plain violation of the Agreements, as a sine qua non to further negotiations. We, on the other hand, while compelled by logic to admit that the Agreements should furnish the basis of any final settlement, cannot actually go back to them without sacrificing many of our aims, especially our own sine qua non of preserving an independent, anti-Communist government in South Vietnam, because they violate the Agreements.

Our “original sin,” so to speak, was our persistence, during President Eisenhower’s Administration, in acting as if the Geneva Agreements had endowed the South Vietnamese regime with the legal status of a nation, which is contrary to fact. This original mistake was compounded when President Kennedy gave military aid to South Vietnam in plain violation of the Geneva Agreements. These errors were further compounded when President Johnson, in violation of our own Constitution, transformed our military aid to the South Vietnamese into an American war without benefit of a declaration of war by Congress and proceeded to attack as a “foreign nation” the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. This accumulation of blunders hangs like an albatross about our neck. We shall not be able to free ourselves from its strangling effect until we can summon the courage to admit, with as good grace as we can muster, our “original sin,” compounded many times, and to purge ourselves of it by making such amends as are within our power and our resources. Unless and until we do this, there is little likelihood that we can break the deadlock in Paris. Certainly Hanoi, backed by the Geneva Agreements, though it might accept a popularly elected non-Communist government in South Vietnam, at least as a temporary settlement, will never agree to the continuance in power of the present anti-Communist government, which we seem to think we are pledged to defend to the last American.

During his campaign Nixon had promised a new plan for peace in Vietnam, and on May 14, 1969, he presented it to the American people. Six months later, on November 3, he delivered another major and much heralded address on Vietnam. The latter speech was, however, disappointing, for it added nothing of importance to the original plan and was significant chiefly, and perhaps unintentionally, for making it

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clear that the Vietnam struggle was now “Nixon’s war.” My comments on Nixon’s plan, therefore, will refer to his presentation of May 14.

In many respects it was a surprisingly good plan—in its ruling out a purely military solution, in its renunciation of permanent military bases in or permanent military ties with South Vietnam, in its acceptance of neutrality for South Vietnam “if that is what the South Vietnamese people freely choose,” of reunification “if that turns out to be what the people of South Vietnam and the people of North Vietnam want,” of “any government in South Vietnam that results from the free choice of the South Vietnamese people themselves,” and particularly in its final statement that “all parties would agree to observe the Geneva Accords of 1954 regarding Vietnam . . .”

But unfortunately it was not good enough because we had not yet acquired the humility to admit, as a truly great nation should, that we had made a colossal series of blunders at the beginning of this trouble and to promise that we would now undertake to do everything possible to rectify and atone for the unhappy results of these mistakes.

If we should do this and, as President Nixon suggested in his address, “observe the Geneva Accords of 1954,” the albatross would fall from our neck, and the path to peace would be clear. An immediate cease-fire would be declared as at Geneva in 1954. Our army and its allies, the armed forces of South Vietnam, South Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, Australia, and New Zealand (like the French and their South Vietnamese allies in 1954) would remain south of the 17th parallel, and those of them who are foreigners would be evacuated (as were the French) within three hundred days, yielding also within that period all their military bases. The armed forces of North Vietnam (like the Vietminh in 1954) would move to and remain within the area north of the 17th parallel. As in 1954 and as suggested in President Nixon’s plan, “an international supervisory body, acceptable to both sides, would be created for the purpose of verifying withdrawals, and for any other purposes agreed upon between the two sides . . . . As soon as possible after the international body was functioning, elections would be held under agreed procedures and under the supervision of the international body.”

These elections, however, should not be confined to South Vietnam, as in President Nixon’s proposal, but should include all of Vietnam as envisaged in the original Geneva Agreements. Furthermore, they should be supervised, not by a “coalition” electoral commission (as has sometimes been suggested), which would doubtless end up by wrangling and falling apart, but by a strictly international commission. Great care should be taken to insure that this commission be composed of persons of the greatest integrity and impartiality. It should not be beyond the realm of possibility to find a sufficient number of such persons. This might, indeed, prove to be a golden opportunity for the United Nations to bring about the peace in Vietnam it has sought ineffectually to bring about since the beginning of hostilities there, especially since President Nixon, in his address to the General Assembly of the United Nations on September 18, invited the individual members of the U.N. to take “an active hand” in achieving peace in Vietnam.

The first question on the ballot in such an election should be: “Do you wish Vietnam to be reunited under a single government?” For those answering in the negative there should then follow a slate of candidates for the various offices necessary, as specified in its present constitution, to constitute a government for South Vietnam. Below this, for those answering the original question in the affirmative, there should appear a slate of candidates for those offices considered by the international electoral commission to be essential for at least a provisional government for all Vietnam. In the case of both slates, qualifications for candidacy promulgated by the international body should be sufficiently elastic to make it certain that no leader with a reasonably well-organized body of followers would be denied a place on the ballot.

Although it would violate the original intent of the Geneva Agreements it might be well for the international electoral commission, recognizing the realities of the situation (namely, that South Vietnam had existed as a separate state at least de facto since 1955), to rule that a majority of affirmative votes on the main question must be cast in South Vietnam as well as in Vietnam as a whole in order for a single united state to be created. Failing this, the ballots of those voting negatively on the main question in South Vietnam would be used to determine the candidates elected to office in the government of South Vietnam, while all ballots cast in North Vietnam would be disregarded, and that government would remain in statu quo for the time being.

The advantage of this procedure would be that, after having for so long paid lip service to the principle of self-determination for South Vietnam, we would actually be permitting the exercise of it and, furthermore, in keeping with the intent of the Geneva Agreements, we would also be permitting the exercise of self-determination by all Vietnamese and, most important of all, if the elections were honestly carried out (more honestly than in 1967) under strict inter-
national supervision, we would be accepting the risks that always attend the exercise of the right of self-determination.

An election in all of Vietnam would, of course, require the assent and cooperation of the government of North Vietnam. Since, however, the odds would strongly favor North Vietnam's securing control of any government elected for all of Vietnam, and since the procedure previously outlined would prevent any interference with the present government of North Vietnam if the election failed to produce a provisional government for all of Vietnam, there is good reason to believe that North Vietnam might accept such a proposal if offered at the bargaining table in Paris. By so doing, it could probably win peacefully the victory of which it had been robbed by Diem's refusal to permit such an election in 1956. Moreover, a victory with ballots rather than with bullets would enhance the prestige of the Vietnamese Communists in the eyes of the rest of the world.

In view of the unpopularity of the present regime in South Vietnam (most of whose members fought with the French against their own countrymen and who, even in the "rigged" election of 1967, were able to gain only a third of the total vote) and because of the charisma of the late Ho Chi Minh, some of which may pass on to his successor or successors, it would seem not impossible that a majority, even in the South, might vote for a unified Vietnam. Even if this did not happen, a majority of Viet Cong candidates might be elected to hold office in South Vietnam.

In either case, all of Vietnam would be Communist-controlled, under either one or two governments. This would be distasteful to us. We would probably prefer another possibility, namely, the return of the present government or something similar to it in South Vietnam, which would mean that the South Vietnamese would be no worse off than they had been during our occupation. But at least we would have given self-determination an honest trial for all the world to see, and our acceptance, even though reluctant, of the result, would regain for us throughout the world some of the respect and prestige that our earlier highly questionable dealings in that area had forfeited.

Even if the worst occurred, would a Communist-dominated Vietnam really be an unmitigated tragedy? It is true, of course, that those on the losing side in elections would have to be protected against reprisals by the victors. This was covered in the original Agreement on Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam by the following statement: "Each party undertakes to refrain from any reprisals or discrimination against persons or organizations on account of their activities during the hostilities and to guarantee their democratic liberties." To police such an agreement it might be necessary to form the permanent international police force that many have felt the United Nations should have at its disposal. In addition to protecting ordinary citizens against reprisals, it might also be necessary to offer political asylum in another country, presumably the United States, to outstanding leaders of defeated factions, parties, or former governments. On the whole, preventing reprisals seems to offer no insuperable difficulties.

But would a Communist-dominated Vietnam mean that we would soon have to be fighting Communists in the streets of San Francisco and New York? Only the "lunatic fringe" can believe such nonsense. Indeed, it looks as if we may be fighting other than Communists in the streets of those and other of our cities for some time in the future, especially if we fail to end soon and completely the war in Vietnam.

Would all the Dullesian dominoes fall? It seems very unlikely, especially since the domino theory has been largely discredited by the fact that, after the Communist take-over of mainland China twenty years ago, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, the Philippines, and even Laos are still in existence as non-Communist states. But even if they did fall, is a paramount or major influence by the United States in Southeast Asia any more essential to the security of the United States than a similar influence is to the security of the Peoples' Republic of China or than a paramount or major influence in the Caribbean is to the security of the Soviet Union?

It would seem, then, that our withdrawal after the exercise in Vietnam of real self-determination in an internationally supervised election in accordance with the original Geneva Agreements may be the closest we can get to our stated aim of "withdrawal with honor," and perhaps we should be satisfied with it. At least the upcoming generation of American youth would not continue to be decimated while seemingly meaningless and endless talks drag on in Paris.

Before the complete withdrawal of our troops we should, in partial expiation of our "original sin" and its cumulative effects, begin restoring, with the same vigor and prodigality that we displayed in destroying them, the damaged and blighted areas of both North and South Vietnam. The fulfillment (contingent upon the assent of Congress) of President Johnson's pledge in his speech at Johns Hopkins University on April 8, 1965, of a "billion-dollar American investment" in the development of Southeast Asia might serve as a starter. What happens in the political arena in Vietnam, however, after the withdrawal of our troops, should be none of our business as it should have been none of our business in the first place.