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## A VIET NAM REAPPRAISAL

The Personal History of One Man's View  
and How It Evolved

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**V** IET Nam remains unquestionably the transcendent problem that confronts our nation. Though the escalation has ceased, we seem to be no closer to finding our way out of this infinitely complex difficulty. The confidence of the past has become the frustration of the present. Predictions of progress and of military success, made so often by so many, have proved to be illusory as the fighting and the dying continue at a tragic rate. Within our country, the dialogue quickens and the debate sharpens. There is a growing impatience among our people, and questions regarding the war and our participation in it are being asked with increasing vehemence.

Many individuals these past years have sought to make some contribution toward finding the answers that have been so elusive. It is with this hope in mind that I present herewith the case history of one man's attitude toward Viet Nam, and the various stages of thought he experienced as he plodded painfully from one point of view to another, and another, until he arrived at the unshakable opinion he possesses today.

Views on Viet Nam have become increasingly polarized as the war has gone on without visible progress toward the traditional American military triumph. There remain some who insist that we were right to intervene militarily and, because we were right, we have no choice but to press on until the enemy knuckles under and concedes defeat. At the other extreme, and in increasing numbers, there are those who maintain that the present unsatisfactory situation proves that our Viet Nam policy has

been wrong from the very beginning. There are even those who suggest that our problems in Viet Nam cast doubt on the entire course of American foreign policy since World War II. Both schools share a common and, as I see it, an erroneous concept. They both would make military victory the ultimate test of the propriety of our participation in the conflict in Southeast Asia.

I find myself unable to agree with either extreme. At the time of our original involvement in Viet Nam, I considered it to be based upon sound and unassailable premises, thoroughly consistent with our self-interest and our responsibilities. There has been no change in the exemplary character of our intentions in Viet Nam. We intervened to help a new and small nation resist subjugation by a neighboring country—a neighboring country, incidentally, which was being assisted by the resources of the world's two largest communist powers.

I see no profit and no purpose in any divisive national debate about whether we were right or wrong initially to become involved in the struggle in Viet Nam. Such debate at the present time clouds the issue and obscures the pressing need for a clear and logical evaluation of our present predicament, and how we can extricate ourselves from it.

Only history will be able to tell whether or not our military presence in Southeast Asia was warranted. Certainly the decisions that brought it about were based upon a reasonable reading of the past three decades. We had seen the calamitous consequences of standing aside while totalitarian and expansionist nations moved successively against their weaker neighbors and accumulated a military might which left even the stronger nations uneasy and insecure. We had seen in the period immediately after World War II the seemingly insatiable urge of the Soviet Union to secure satellite states on its western periphery. We had seen in Asia itself the attempt by open invasion to extend communist control into the independent South of the Korean Peninsula. We had reason to feel that the fate averted in Korea through American and United Nations military force would overtake the independent countries of Asia, albeit in somewhat subtler form, were we to stand aside while the communist North sponsored subversion and terrorism in South Viet Nam.

The transformation that has taken place in my thinking has been brought about, however, by the conclusion that the world situation has changed dramatically, and that American involve-

ment in Viet Nam can and must change with it. Important ingredients of this present situation include the manner in which South Viet Nam and its Asian neighbors have responded to the threat and to our own massive intervention. They also include internal developments both in Asian nations and elsewhere, and the changing relations among world powers.

The decisions which our nation faces today in Viet Nam should not be made on interpretations of the facts as they were perceived four or five or fifteen years ago, even if, through compromise, a consensus could be reached on these interpretations. They must instead be based upon our present view of our obligations as a world power; upon our current concept of our national security; upon our conclusions regarding our commitments as they exist today; upon our fervent desire to contribute to peace throughout the world; and, hopefully, upon our acceptance of the principle of enlightened self-interest.

But these are broad and general guidelines, subject to many constructions and misconstructions. They also have the obvious drawback of being remote and impersonal.

The purpose of this article is to present to the reader the intimate and highly personal experience of one man, in the hope that by so doing there will be a simpler and clearer understanding of where we are in Viet Nam today, and what we must do about it. I shall go back to the beginning and identify, as well as I can, the origins of my consciousness of the problem, the opportunities I had to obtain the facts, and the resulting evolution of what I shall guardedly refer to as my thought processes.

## n

Although I had served President Truman in the White House from May 1945 until February 1950,<sup>1</sup> I do not recall ever having had to focus on Southeast Asia. Indochina, as it was then universally known, was regarded by our government as a French problem. President Truman was prompted from time to time by the State Department to approve statements that seemed to me to be little more than reiterations of the long-standing American attitude against "colonialism." If any of those provoked extensive discussion at the White House, I cannot recall. For the next decade, I watched foreign affairs and the growing turbulence of Asia from the sidelines as a private citizen, increasingly concerned but not directly involved.

In the summer of 1960, Senator John Kennedy invited me to act as his transition planner, and later as liaison with the Eisenhower Administration in the interval between the election and January 20, 1961. Among the foreign policy problems that I encountered at once was a deteriorating situation in Southeast Asia. Major-General Wilton B. Persons, whom President Eisenhower had designated to work with me, explained the gravity of the situation as viewed by the outgoing Administration. I suggested to the President-elect that it would be well for him to hear President Eisenhower personally on the subject. He agreed, and accordingly General Persons and I placed Southeast Asia as the first item on the agenda of the final meeting between the outgoing and the incoming Presidents. This meeting, held on the morning of January 19, 1961, in the Cabinet Room, was attended by President Eisenhower, Secretary of State Christian Herter, Secretary of Defense Thomas Gates, Secretary of the Treasury Robert Anderson and General Persons. President-elect Kennedy had his counterparts present: Secretary of State-designate Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense-designate Robert McNamara, Secretary of the Treasury-designate Douglas Dillon, and me.

At President-elect Kennedy's suggestion, I took notes of the important subjects discussed. Most of the time, the discussion centered on Southeast Asia, with emphasis upon Laos. At that particular time, January 1961, Laos had come sharply into focus and appeared to constitute the major danger in the area.

My notes disclose the following comments by the President:

**At this point, President Eisenhower said, with considerable emotion, that Laos was the key to the entire area of Southeast Asia.**

**He said that if we permitted Laos to fall, then we would have to write off all the area. He stated we must not permit a Communist take-over. He reiterated that we should make every effort to persuade member nations of SEATO or the International Control Commission to accept the burden with us to defend the freedom of Laos.**

**As he concluded these remarks, President Eisenhower stated it was imperative that Laos be defended. He said that the United States should accept this task with our allies, if we could persuade them, and alone if we could not. He added, "Our unilateral intervention would be our last desperate hope in the event we were unable to prevail upon the other signatories to join us."**

That morning's discussion, and the gravity with which President Eisenhower addressed the problem, had a substantial impact on me. He and his advisers were finishing eight years of responsible service to the nation. I had neither facts nor personal

experience to challenge their assessment of the situation, even if I had had the inclination to do so. The thrust of the presentation was the great importance to the United States of taking a firm stand in Southeast Asia, and I accepted that judgment.

On an earlier occasion, in speaking of Southeast Asia, President Eisenhower had said that South Viet Nam's capture by the communists would bring their power several hundred miles into a hitherto free region. The freedom of 12 million people would be lost immediately, and that of 150 million in adjacent lands would be seriously endangered. The loss of South Viet Nam would set in motion a crumbling process that could, as it progressed, have grave consequences for us and for freedom.

As I listened to him in the Cabinet Room that January morning, I recalled that it was President Eisenhower who had acquainted the public with the phrase "domino theory" by using it to describe how one country after another could be expected to fall under communist control once the process started in Southeast Asia.

In the spring of 1961, I was appointed to membership on the President's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. In this capacity, I received briefings from time to time on affairs in Asia. The information provided the Board supported the assessment of the previous Administration, with which President Kennedy concurred. "Withdrawal in the case of Viet Nam," President Kennedy said in 1961, "and in the case of Thailand could mean the collapse of the whole area." He never wavered. A year later, he said of Viet Nam: "We are not going to withdraw from that effort. In my opinion, for us to withdraw from that effort would mean a collapse not only of South Viet Nam but Southeast Asia. So we are going to stay there." I had no occasion to question the collective opinion of our duly chosen officials.

After President Johnson took office, our involvement became greater, but so did most public and private assessments of the correctness of our course. The Tonkin Gulf resolution was adopted by the Congress in 1964 by a vote of 504 to 2. The language was stem: "The United States is, therefore, prepared, as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty requesting assistance in defense of its freedom."

When decisions were made in 1965 to increase, in very sub-

stantial fashion, the American commitment in Viet Nam, I accepted the judgment that such actions were necessary. That fall, I made a trip to Southeast Asia in my capacity as Chairman of the Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board. The optimism of our military and Vietnamese officials on the conduct of the war, together with the encouragement of our Asian allies, confirmed my belief in the correctness of our policy. In the absence at the time of indications that Hanoi had any interest in peace negotiations, I did not favor the 37-day bombing halt over the Christmas 1965-New Year 1966 holiday season. I felt such a halt could be construed by Hanoi as a sign of weakness on our part.

In 1966, I served as an adviser to President Johnson at the Manila Conference. It was an impressive gathering of the Chiefs of State and Heads of Government of the allied nations; it reassured me that we were on the right road and that our military progress was bringing us closer to the resolution of the conflict.

In the late summer of 1967, President Johnson asked me to go with his Special Assistant, General Maxwell Taylor, to review the situation in South Viet Nam, and then to visit some of our Pacific allies. We were to brief them on the war and to discuss with them the possibility of their increasing their troop commitments. Our briefings in South Viet Nam were extensive and encouraging. There were suggestions that the enemy was being hurt badly and that our bombing and superior firepower were beginning to achieve the expected results.

Our visits to the allied capitals, however, produced results that I had not foreseen. It was strikingly apparent to me that the other troop-contributing countries no longer shared our degree of concern about the war in South Viet Nam. General Taylor and I urged them to increase their participation. In the main, our plea fell on deaf ears.

Thailand, a near neighbor to South Viet Nam, with a population of some 30 million, had assigned only 2,500 men to South Viet Nam, and was in no hurry to allocate more.

The President of the Philippines advised President Johnson that he preferred we not stop there because of possible adverse public reaction. The Philippines, so close and ostensibly so vulnerable if they accepted the domino theory, had sent a hospital corps and an engineer battalion to Viet Nam, but no combat troops. It was also made clear to President Johnson that they had no intention of sending any combat personnel.

South Korea had the only sizable contingent of Asian troops assisting South Viet Nam, but officials argued that a higher level of activity on the part of the North Koreans prevented their increasing their support.

Disappointing though these visits were, I had high hopes for the success of our mission in Australia and New Zealand. I recalled that Australia, then with a much smaller population, had been able to maintain well over 300,000 troops overseas in World War II. They had sent only 7,000 to Viet Nam. Surely there was hope here. But Prime Minister Holt, who had been fully briefed, presented a long list of reasons why Australia was already close to its maximum effort.

In New Zealand, we spent the better part of a day conferring with the Prime Minister and his cabinet, while hundreds of students picketed the Parliament Building carrying signs bearing peace slogans. These officials were courteous and sympathetic, as all the others had been, but they made it clear that any appreciable increase was out of the question. New Zealand at one time had 70,000 troops overseas in the various theaters of World War II. They had 500 men in Viet Nam. I naturally wondered if this was their evaluation of the respective dangers of the two conflicts.

I returned home puzzled, troubled, concerned. Was it possible that our assessment of the danger to the stability of Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific was exaggerated? Was it possible that those nations which were neighbors of Viet Nam had a clearer perception of the tides of world events in 1967 than we? Was it possible that we were continuing to be guided by judgments that might once have had validity but were now obsolete? In short, although I still counted myself a staunch supporter of our policies, there were nagging, not-to-be-suppressed doubts in my mind.

These doubts were dramatized a short time later back in the United States when I attended a dinner at the White House for Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore. His country, which knew the bitterness of defeat and occupation in World War II, had declined to send any men at all to Viet Nam. In answer to my question as to when he thought troops might be sent, he stated he saw no possibility of that taking place because of the adverse political effect in Singapore.

Accordingly, I welcomed President Johnson's San Antonio speech of September 30, 1967, with far greater enthusiasm than

I would have had I not so recently returned from the Pacific. I felt it marked a substantial step in the right direction because it offered an alternative to a military solution of the lengthy and costly conflict. Allied bombing of North Viet Nam had by now assumed a symbolic significance of enormous proportions and the President focused his attention on this. The essence of his proposal was an offer to stop the bombing of North Viet Nam if prompt and productive peace discussions with the other side would ensue. We would assume that the other side would “not take advantage” of the bombing cessation. By this formula, the President made an imaginative move to end the deadlock over the bombing and get negotiations started.

I, of course, shared the universal disappointment that the San Antonio offer evoked no favorable response from Hanoi, but my feelings were more complex than those of mere disappointment. As I listened to the official discussion in Washington, my feelings turned from disappointment to dismay. I found it was being quietly asserted that, in return for a bombing cessation in the North, the North Vietnamese must stop sending men and matériel into South Viet Nam. On the surface, this might have seemed a fair exchange. To me, it was an unfortunate interpretation that—intentionally or not—rendered the San Antonio formula virtually meaningless. The North Vietnamese had more than 100,000 men in the South. It was totally unrealistic to expect them to abandon their men by not replacing casualties, and by failing to provide them with clothing, food, munitions and other supplies. We could never expect them to accept an offer to negotiate on those conditions.

### III

In mid-January 1968, President Johnson asked me to serve as Secretary of Defense, succeeding Secretary McNamara, who was leaving to become President of the World Bank. In the confirmation hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee on January 25, *I* was asked about the San Antonio formula. The interpretation I gave was in accord with President Johnson’s intense desire to start negotiations, and it offered a possibility of acceptance which I was convinced did not exist with the extreme and rigid interpretations that so concerned me. I said that I assumed that the North Vietnamese would “continue to transport the normal amount of goods, munitions and men to South



Viet Nam” at the levels that had prevailed prior to our bombing cessation. This was my understanding of what the President meant by “not take advantage.”

The varying interpretations of the San Antonio formula raised in my mind the question as to whether all of us had the same objective in view. Some, it seemed, could envision as satisfactory no solution short of the complete military defeat of the enemy. I did not count myself in this group. Although I still accepted as valid the premises of our Viet Nam involvement, I was dissatisfied with the rigidities that so limited our course of action and our alternatives.

I took office on March 1, 1968. The enemy’s Tet offensive of late January and early February had been beaten back at great cost. The confidence of the American people had been badly shaken. The ability of the South Vietnamese Government to restore order and morale in the populace, and discipline and esprit in the armed forces, was being questioned. At the President’s direction, General Earle G. Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had flown to Viet Nam in late February for an on-the-spot conference with General Westmoreland. He had just returned and presented the military’s request that over 200,000 troops be prepared for deployment to Viet Nam. These troops would be in addition to the 525,000 previously authorized. I was directed, as my first assignment, to chair a task force named by the President to determine how this new requirement could be met. We were not instructed to assess the need for substantial increases in men and materiel; we were to devise the means by which they could be provided.

My work was cut out. The task force included Secretary Rusk, Secretary Henry Fowler, Under Secretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach, Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Nitze, General Wheeler, CIA Director Richard Helms, the President’s Special Assistant, Walt Rostow, General Maxwell Taylor and other skilled and highly capable officials. All of them had had long and direct experience with Vietnamese problems. I had not. I had attended various meetings in the past several years and I had been to Viet Nam three times, but it was quickly apparent to me how little one knows if he has been on the periphery of a problem and not truly in it. Until the day-long sessions of early March, I had never had the opportunity of intensive analysis and fact-finding. Now I was thrust into a vigorous, ruthlessly

frank assessment of our situation by the men who knew the most about it. Try though we would to stay with the assignment of devising means to meet the military's requests, fundamental questions began to recur over and over.

It is, of course, not possible to recall all the questions that were asked nor all of the answers that were given. Had a transcript of our discussions been made—one was not—it would have run to hundreds of closely printed pages. The documents brought to the table by participants would have totalled, if collected in one place—which they were not—many hundreds more. All that is pertinent to this essay are the impressions I formed, and the conclusions I ultimately reached in those days of exhausting scrutiny. In the colloquial style of those meetings, here are some of the principal issues raised and some of the answers as I understood them :

“Will 200,000 more men do the job?” I found no assurance that they would.

“If not, how many more might be needed—and when?” There was no way of knowing.

“What would be involved in committing 200,000 more men to Viet Nam?” A reserve call-up of approximately 280,000, an increased draft call and an extension of tours of duty of most men then in service.

“Can the enemy respond with a build-up of his own?” He could and he probably would.

“What are the estimated costs of the latest requests?” First calculations were on the order of \$2 billion for the remaining four months of that fiscal year, and an increase of \$10 to \$12 billion for the year beginning July 1, 1968.

“What will be the impact on the economy?” So great that we would face the possibility of credit restrictions, a tax increase and even wage and price controls. The balance of payments would be worsened by at least half a billion dollars a year.

“Can bombing stop the war?” Never by itself. It was inflicting heavy personnel and matériel losses, but bombing by itself would not stop the war.

“Will stepping up the bombing decrease American casualties?” Very little, if at all. Our casualties were due to the intensity of the ground fighting in the South. We had already dropped a heavier tonnage of bombs than in all the theaters of World War II. During 1967, an estimated 90,000 North Vietnamese had in-

filtrated into South Viet Nam. In the opening weeks of 1968, infiltrators were coming in at three to four times the rate of a year earlier, despite the ferocity and intensity of our campaign of aerial interdiction.

“How long must we keep on sending our men and carrying the main burden of combat?” The South Vietnamese were doing better, but they were not ready yet to replace our troops and we did not know when they would be.

When I asked for a presentation of the military plan for attaining victory in Viet Nam, I was told that there was no plan for victory in the historic American sense. Why not? Because our forces were operating under three major political restrictions: The President had forbidden the invasion of North Viet Nam because this could trigger the mutual assistance pact between North Viet Nam and China; the President had forbidden the mining of the harbor at Haiphong, the principal port through which the North received military supplies, because a Soviet vessel might be sunk; the President had forbidden our forces to pursue the enemy into Laos and Cambodia, for to do so would spread the war, politically and geographically, with no discernible advantage. These and other restrictions which precluded an all-out, no-holds-barred military effort were wisely designed to prevent our being drawn into a larger war. We had no inclination to recommend to the President their cancellation.

“Given these circumstances, how can we win?” We would, I was told, continue to evidence our superiority over the enemy; we would continue to attack in the belief that he would reach the stage where he would find it inadvisable to go on with the war. He could not afford the attrition we were inflicting on him. And we were improving our posture all the time.

I then asked, “What is the best estimate as to how long this course of action will take? Six months? One year? Two years?” There was no agreement on an answer. Not only was there no agreement, I could find no one willing to express any confidence in his guesses. Certainly, none of us was willing to assert that he could see “light at the end of the tunnel” or that American troops would be coming home by the end of the year.

After days of this type of analysis, my concern had greatly deepened. I could not find out when the war was going to end; I could not find out the manner in which it was going to end; I could not find out whether the new requests for men and equip-

ment were going to be enough, or whether it would take more and, if more, when and how much; I could not find out how soon the South Vietnamese forces would be ready to take over. All I had was the statement, given with too little self-assurance to be comforting, that if we persisted for an indeterminate length of time, the enemy would choose not to go on.

And so I asked, "Does anyone see any diminution in the will of the enemy after four years of our having been there, after enormous casualties and after massive destruction from our bombing?"

The answer was that there appeared to be no diminution in the will of the enemy. This reply was doubly impressive, because I was more conscious each day of domestic unrest in our own country. Draft card burnings, marches in the streets, problems on school campuses, bitterness and divisiveness were rampant. Just as disturbing to me were the economic implications of a struggle to be indefinitely continued at ever-increasing cost. The dollar was already in trouble, prices were escalating far too fast and emergency controls on foreign investment imposed on New Year's Day would be only a prelude to more stringent controls, if we were to add another \$12 billion to Viet Nam spending—with perhaps still more to follow.

I was also conscious of our obligations and involvements elsewhere in the world. There were certain hopeful signs in our relations with the Soviet Union, but both nations were hampered in moving toward vitally important talks on the limitation of strategic weapons so long as the United States was committed to a military solution in Viet Nam. We could not afford to disregard our interests in the Middle East, South Asia, Africa, Western Europe and elsewhere. Even accepting the validity of our objective in Viet Nam, that objective had to be viewed in the context of our overall national interest, and could not sensibly be pursued at a price so high as to impair our ability to achieve other, and perhaps even more important, foreign policy objectives.

Also, I could not free myself from the continuing nagging doubt left over from that August trip, that if the nations living in the shadow of Viet Nam were not now persuaded by the domino theory, perhaps it was time for us to take another look. Our efforts had given the nations in that area a number of years following independence to organize and build their security. I

could see no reason at this time for us to continue to add to our commitment. Finally, there was no assurance that a 40 percent increase in American troops would place us within the next few weeks, months or even years in any substantially better military position than we were in then. All that could be predicted accurately was that more troops would raise the level of combat and automatically raise the level of casualties on both sides.

And so, after these exhausting days, I was convinced that the military course we were pursuing was not only endless, but hopeless. A further substantial increase in American forces could only increase the devastation and the Americanization of the war, and thus leave us even further from our goal of a peace that would permit the people of South Viet Nam to fashion their own political and economic institutions. Henceforth, I was also convinced, our primary goal should be to level off our involvement, and to work toward gradual disengagement.

#### IV

To reach a conclusion and to implement it are not the same, especially when one does not have the ultimate power of decision. It now became my purpose to emphasize to my colleagues and to the President, that the United States had entered Viet Nam with a limited aim—to prevent its subjugation by the North and to enable the people of South Viet Nam to determine their own future. I also argued that we had largely accomplished that objective. Nothing required us to remain until the North had been ejected from the South, and the Saigon government had been established in complete military control of all South Viet Nam. An increase of over 200,000 in troop strength would mean that American forces would be twice the size of the regular South Vietnamese Army at that time. Our goal of building a stronger South Vietnamese Government, and an effective military force capable of ultimately taking over from us, would be frustrated rather than furthered. The more we continued to do in South Viet Nam, the less likely the South Vietnamese were to shoulder their own burden.

The debate continued at the White House for days. President Johnson encouraged me to report my findings and my views with total candor, but he was equally insistent on hearing the views of others. Finally, the President, in the closing hours of March, made his decisions and reported them to the people on the eve-

ning of the 31st. Three related directly to the month's review of the war. First, the President announced he was establishing a ceiling of 549,500 in the American commitment to Viet Nam; the only new troops going out would be support troops previously promised. Second, we would speed up our aid to the South Vietnamese armed forces. We would equip and train them to take over major combat responsibilities from us on a much accelerated schedule. Third, speaking to Hanoi, the President stated he was greatly restricting American bombing of the North as an invitation and an inducement to begin peace talks. We would no longer bomb north of the Twentieth Parallel. By this act of unilateral restraint, nearly 80 percent of the territory of North Viet Nam would no longer be subjected to our bombing.

I had taken office at the beginning of the month with one overriding immediate assignment—responding to the military request to strengthen our forces in Viet Nam so that we might prosecute the war more forcefully. Now my colleagues and I had two different and longer-range tasks—developing a plan for shifting the burden to the South Vietnamese as rapidly as they could be made ready, and supporting our government's diplomatic efforts to engage in peace talks.

To assess the rate of progress in the first task, I went to Viet Nam in July. I was heartened by the excellent spirit and the condition of our forces, but I found distressingly little evidence that the other troop-contributing countries, or the South Vietnamese, were straining to relieve us of our burdens. Although there had been nominal increases in troop contributions from Australia and Thailand since the preceding summer, the Philippines had actually withdrawn several hundred men. The troop-contributing countries were bearing no more of the combat burden; their casualty rates were actually falling.

As for South Vietnamese officials, in discussion after discussion, I found them professing unawareness of shortcomings in such matters as troop training, junior officer strength and rate of desertions. They were, I felt, too complacent when the facts were laid before them. I asked Vice President Ky, for example, about the gross desertion rate of South Vietnamese combat personnel that was running at 30 percent a year. He responded that it was so large, in part, because their men were not paid enough. I asked what his government intended to do. He suggested that we could cut back our bombing, give the money thus

saved to the Saigon government, and it would be used for troop pay. He was not jesting; his suggestion was a serious one. I returned home oppressed by the pervasive Americanization of the war: we were still giving the military instructions, still doing most of the fighting, still providing all the matériel, still paying most of the bills. Worst of all, I concluded that the South Vietnamese leaders seemed content to have it that way.

The North had responded to the President's speech of March 31 and meetings had begun in Paris in May. It was, however, a euphemism to call them peace talks. In mid-summer, substantive discussions had not yet begun. Our negotiators, the able and experienced Ambassador Averell Harriman and his talented associate, Cyrus Vance, were insisting that the Saigon government be a participant in the talks. Hanoi rejected this. President Johnson, rightly and understandably, refused to order a total bombing halt of the North until Hanoi would accept reciprocal restraints. Hanoi refused. With this unsatisfactory deadlock, the summer passed in Paris.

In Viet Nam, American casualty lists were tragically long, week after week. The enemy was not winning but, I felt, neither were we. There were many other areas in the world where our influence, moral force and economic contributions were sorely in demand and were limited because of our preoccupation with our involvement in Southeast Asia.

I returned from a NATO meeting in Bonn on Sunday evening, October 13, to find a summons to a White House meeting the following morning. There had been movement in Paris. There were no formal agreements, but certain "understandings" had been reached by our negotiating team and the North Vietnamese. At last the North had accepted the participation of the South in peace talks. We would stop all bombing of North Viet Nam. Substantive talks were to start promptly. We had made it clear to Hanoi that we could not continue such talks if there were indiscriminate shelling of major cities in the South, or if the demilitarized zone were violated so as to place our troops in jeopardy.

The President outlined the situation to his advisers. We spent a day of hard and full review. The Joint Chiefs of Staff were unanimous in stating that the bombing halt under these circumstances was acceptable. The State Department was authorized to report to Saigon that we had won a seat at the conference

table for the Saigon government and to request the earliest possible presence of their delegation in Paris. I felt a sense of relief and hope; we were started down the road to peace.

These feelings were short-lived. The next three weeks were almost as agonizing to me as March had been. The cables from Saigon were stunning. The South Vietnamese Government, suddenly and unexpectedly, was not willing to go to Paris. First one reason, then another, then still another were cabled to Washington. As fast as one Saigon obstacle was overcome, another took its place. Incredulity turned to dismay. I felt that the President and the United States were being badly used. Even worse, I felt that Saigon was attempting to exert a veto power over our agreement to engage in peace negotiations. I admired greatly the President's ability to be patient under the most exasperating circumstances. Each day ran the risk that the North might change its mind, and that months of diligent effort at Paris would be in vain; each day saw a new effort on his part to meet the latest Saigon objection.

To satisfy himself that the bombing halt would neither jeopardize our own forces nor those of our allies, the President ordered General Creighton W. Abrams back from South Viet Nam for a personal report. Finally, on October 31, President Johnson announced that the bombing of North Viet Nam would cease, peace talks would begin promptly and Saigon was assured of a place at the conference table. However, it took weeks to get the Saigon government to Paris, and still additional weeks to get their agreement on seating arrangements.

By the time the various difficulties had been resolved, certain clear and unequivocal opinions regarding the attitude and posture of the Saigon government had crystalized in my mind. These opinions had been forming since my trip to South Viet Nam the preceding July.

The goal of the Saigon government and the goal of the United States were no longer one and the same, if indeed they ever had been. They were not in total conflict but they were clearly not identical. We had largely accomplished the objective for which we had entered the struggle. There was no longer any question about the desire of the American people to bring the Viet Nam adventure to a close.

As Ambassador Harriman observed, it is dangerous to let your aims be escalated in the middle of a war. Keep your objectives in



mind, he advised, and as soon as they are attained, call a halt. The winning of the loyalty of villagers to the central government in Saigon, the form of a postwar government, who its leaders should be and how they are to be selected—these were clearly not among our original war objectives. But these were the precise areas of our differences with the Saigon government.

As Saigon authorities saw it, the longer the war went on, with the large-scale American involvement, the more stable was their regime, and the fewer concessions they would have to make to other political groupings. If the United States were to continue its military efforts for another two or three years, perhaps the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong would be so decimated that no concessions would be needed at all. In the meantime, vast amounts of American wealth were being poured into the South Vietnamese economy. In short, grim and distasteful though it might be, I concluded during the bleak winter weeks that Saigon was in no hurry for the fighting to end and that the Saigon regime did not want us to reach an early settlement of military issues with Hanoi.

The fact is that the creation of strong political, social and economic institutions is a job that the Vietnamese must do for themselves. We cannot do it for them, nor can they do it while our presence hangs over them so massively. President Thieu, Vice President Ky, Prime Minister Huong and those who may follow them have the task of welding viable political institutions from the 100 or more splinter groups that call themselves political parties. It is up to us to let them get on with the job. Nothing we might do could be so beneficial or could so add to the political maturity of South Viet Nam as to begin to withdraw our combat troops. Moreover, in my opinion, we cannot realistically expect to achieve anything more through our military force, and the time has come to begin to disengage. That was my final conclusion as I left the Pentagon on January 20, 1969.

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It remains my firm opinion today. It is based not only on my personal experiences, but on the many significant changes that have occurred in the world situation in the last four years.

In 1965, the forces supported by North Viet Nam were on the verge of a military take-over of South Viet Nam. Only by sending large numbers of American troops was it possible to

prevent this from happening. The South Vietnamese were militarily weak and politically demoralized. They could not, at that time, be expected to preserve for themselves the right to determine their own future. Communist China had recently proclaimed its intention to implement the doctrine of "wars of national liberation." Khrushchev's fall from power the preceding October and Chou En-lai's visit to Moscow in November 1964 posed the dire possibility of the two communist giants working together to spread disruption throughout the underdeveloped nations of the world. Indonesia, under Sukarno, presented a posture of implacable hostility toward Malaysia, and was a destabilizing element in the entire Pacific picture. Malaysia itself, as well as Thailand and Singapore, needed time for their governmental institutions to mature. Apparent American indifference to developments in Asia might, at that time, have had a disastrous impact on the independent countries of that area.

During the past four years, the situation has altered dramatically. The armed forces of South Viet Nam have increased in size and proficiency. The political situation there has become more stable, and the governmental institutions more representative. Elsewhere in Asia, conditions of greater security exist. The bloody defeat of the attempted communist coup in Indonesia removed Sukarno from power and changed the confrontation with Malaysia to cooperation between the two countries. The governments of Thailand and Singapore have made good use of these four years to increase their popular support. Australia and New Zealand have moved toward closer regional defense ties, while Japan, the Republic of Korea and Taiwan have exhibited a rate of economic growth and an improvement in living standards that discredit the teachings of Chairman Mao.

Of at least equal significance is the fact that, since 1965, relations between Russia and China have steadily worsened. The schism between these two powers is one of the watershed events of our time. Ironically, their joint support of Hanoi has contributed to the acrimony between them. It has brought into focus their competition for leadership in the communist camp. Conflicting positions on the desirability of the peace negotiations in Paris have provided a further divisive factor. In an analogous development, increased Soviet aid to North Korea has made Pyongyang less dependent on China. The Cultural Revolution and the depredations of the Red Guards have created in China

a situation of internal unrest that presently preoccupies China's military forces. The recent border clashes on the Ussuri River further decrease the likelihood that China will, in the near future, be able to devote its attention and resources to the export of revolution.

These considerations are augmented by another. It seems clear that the necessity to devote more of our minds and our means to our pressing domestic problems requires that we set a chronological limit on our Vietnamese involvement.

A year ago, we placed a numerical limit on this involvement, and did so without lessening the effectiveness of the total military effort. There will, undeniably, be many problems inherent in the replacement of American combat forces with South Vietnamese forces. But whatever these problems, they must be faced. There is no way to achieve our goal of creating the conditions that will allow the South Vietnamese to determine their own future unless we begin, and begin promptly, to turn over to them the major responsibility for their own defense. This ability to defend themselves can never be developed so long as we continue to bear the brunt of the battle. Sooner or later, the test must be whether the South Vietnamese will serve their own country sufficiently well to guarantee its national survival. In my view, this test must be made sooner, rather than later.

A first step would be to inform the South Vietnamese Government that we will withdraw about 100,000 troops before the end of this year. We should also make it clear that this is not an isolated action, but the beginning of a process under which all U.S. ground combat forces will have been withdrawn from Viet Nam by the end of 1970. The same information should, of course, be provided to the other countries who are contributing forces for the defense of South Viet Nam.

Strenuous political and military objections to this decision must be anticipated. Arguments will be made that such a withdrawal will cause the collapse of the Saigon government and jeopardize the security of our own and allied troops. Identical arguments, however, were urged against the decisions to restrict the bombing on March 31 of last year and to stop it completely on October 31. They have proven to be unfounded. There is, in fact, no magic and no specific military rationale for the number of American troops presently in South Viet Nam. The current figure represents only the level at which the escalator stopped.

It should also be noted that our military commanders have stated flatly since last summer that no additional American troops are needed. During these months the number of South Vietnamese under arms in the Government cause has increased substantially and we have received steady reports of their improved performance. Gradual withdrawal of American combat troops thus not only would be consistent with continued overall military strength, but also would serve to substantiate the claims of the growing combat effectiveness of the South Vietnamese forces.

Concurrently with the decision to begin withdrawal, orders should be issued to our military commanders to discontinue efforts to apply maximum military pressure on the enemy and to seek instead to reduce the level of combat. The public statements of our officials show that there has as yet been no change in our policy of maximum military effort. The result has been a continuation of the high level of American casualties, without any discernible impact on the peace negotiations in Paris.

While our combat troops are being withdrawn, we would continue to provide the armed forces of the Saigon government with logistic support and with our air resources. As the process goes on, we can appraise both friendly and enemy reactions. The pattern of our eventual withdrawal of non-combat troops and personnel engaged in air lift and air support can be determined on the basis of political and military developments. So long as we retain our air resources in South Viet Nam, with total air superiority, I do not believe that the lessening in the military pressure exerted by the ground forces would permit the enemy to make any significant gains. There is, moreover, the possibility of reciprocal reduction in North Vietnamese combat activity.

Our decision progressively to turn over the combat burden to the armed forces of South Viet Nam would confront the North Vietnamese leaders with a painful dilemma. Word that the Americans were beginning to withdraw might at first lead them to claims of victory. But even these initial claims could be expected to be tinged with apprehension. There has, in my view, long been considerable evidence that Hanoi fears the possibility that those whom they characterize as "puppet forces" may, with continued but gradually reduced American support, prove able to stand off the communist forces.

As American combat forces are withdrawn, Hanoi would be

faced with the prospect of a prolonged and substantial presence of American air and logistics personnel in support of South Viet Nam's combat troops, which would be constantly improving in efficiency. Hanoi's only alternative would be to arrange, tacitly or explicitly, for a mutual withdrawal of all external forces. In either eventuality, the resulting balance of forces should avert any danger of a blood bath which some fear might occur in the aftermath of our withdrawal.

Once our withdrawal of combat troops commences, the Saigon government would recognize, probably for the first time, that American objectives do not demand the perpetuation in power of any one group of South Vietnamese. So long as we appear prepared to remain indefinitely, there is no pressure on Saigon to dilute the control of those presently in positions of power by making room for individuals representative of other nationalist elements in South Vietnamese society.

Accordingly, I anticipate no adverse impact on the Paris negotiations from the announcement and implementation of a program of American withdrawal. Instead, I would foresee the creation of circumstances under which true bargaining may proceed among the Vietnamese present in Paris. Unquestionably, the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front would do so in the hope that any political settlement would move them toward eventual domination in South Viet Nam. But their hopes and expectations necessarily will yield to the political realities, and these political realities are, in the final analysis, both beyond our control and beyond our ken. Moreover, they are basically none of our business. The one million South Vietnamese in the various components of the armed forces, with American logistics, air lift and air support, should be able, if they have the will, to prevent the imposition by force of a Hanoi-controlled régime. If they lack a sense or a sufficiency of national purpose, we can never force it on them.

In the long run, the security of the Pacific region will depend upon the ability of the countries there to meet the legitimate growing demands of their own people. No military strength we can bring to bear can give them internal stability or popular acceptance. In Southeast Asia, and elsewhere in the less developed regions of the world, our ability to understand and to control the basic forces that are at play is a very limited one. We can advise, we can urge, we can furnish economic aid. But Ameri-

can military power cannot build nations, any more than it can solve the social and economic problems that face us here at home.

This, then, is the case history of the evolution of one individual's thinking regarding Viet Nam. Throughout this entire period it has been difficult to cling closely to reality because of the constant recurrence of optimistic predictions that our task was nearly over, and that better times were just around the corner, or just over the next hill.

We cannot afford to lose sight of the fact that this is a limited war, for limited aims and employing limited power. The forces we now have deployed and the human and material costs we are now incurring have become, in my opinion, out of all proportion to our purpose. The present scale of military effort can bring us no closer to meaningful victory. It can only continue to devastate the countryside and to prolong the suffering of the Vietnamese people of every political persuasion.

Unless we have the imagination and the courage to adopt a different course, I am convinced that we will be in no better, and no different, a position a year from now than we are today.

At current casualty rates, 10,000 more American boys will have lost their lives.

We should reduce American casualties by reducing American combat forces. We should do so in accordance with a definite schedule and with a specified end point.

Let us start to bring our men home—and let us start *now*.

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