1

A Vietnam Settlement: The View from Hanoi

There are several reasons why I think it useful to circulate this memorandum concerning my visit to North Vietnam in June of 1968:

(1) To describe conversations with leaders of the North Vietnamese government and the National Liberation Front that shed some light on the distinction between "hard" and "soft" negotiating issues;
(2) To convey my central impression that the cumulative attitude of the North Vietnamese government toward the outcome of negotiations accords more closely with official American conditions for peace in Vietnam than has been generally understood in this country;
(3) To call attention to the fact that the North Vietnamese government thinks that it has already backed down from earlier negotiating demands, and seems prepared to take an especially conciliatory position on the central question of the reunification of Vietnam;
(4) To convey a sense of why I think the formation of the Alliance of National, Democratic, and Peace Forces is an important political development whether or not it is a front of the Front;
(5) To convey some impression of the human quality of the political leadership in Hanoi and of the destructive impact that American war policies have had upon North Vietnam;
(6) To report upon the degree to which there remains in North Vietnam an awareness and appreciation of America's own revolutionary tradition and an eventual hope for the establishment of normal diplomatic, economic, and cultural relations;
(7) To give some report on why the leaders of North Vietnam now feel that they were deceived by President Johnson's offer of peace negotiations on March 31, 1968.

This memorandum summarizes my impressions bearing on settling the Vietnam War. Although I have been convinced for some years that the American role in the Vietnam War has been misconceived and improper, I have tried to keep my opinions from shading my report of attitudes and conditions in North Vietnam. One can never be sure that preconceptions have not shaped perceptions, but I have certainly tried to adhere to the canons of objective reportage. The fact that what I report is at variance with what many Americans believe merely confirms my strong sense that it is important for as many of our citizens as possible to go to North Vietnam and see for themselves.

During the latter part of June I spent a week in North Vietnam, mostly in Hanoi, as the guest of the Vietnamese Association of Lawyers, the President of which is the Minister of Foreign Trade, Mr. Phan Arm. On the visit I was accompanied by Malcolm Burnstein, a lawyer in Oakland and a professor at San Francisco State College. In Hanoi we met with several leaders of the North Vietnamese government, including the Prime Minister, Mr. Pham Van Dong. In addition we had extended discussions with several prominent members of the National Liberation Front. The visit also provided an occasion to tour the bombed area around Phat Diem, a large village 100 miles or so south of Hanoi, and to meet with intellectuals, jurists, journalists, and other representative figures in North Vietnam. After leaving North Vietnam we came to Paris, where we had contact with the North Vietnamese delegation at the peace talks, including Xuan Thuy, and the DRV Ambassador to France, Mai Van Bo.

As an American in the "enemy" capital in time of war, many contradictory feelings of empathy and loyalty emerge. It is, perhaps, a unique feature of this war that American citizens can feel that they promote the national interest by better understanding the position and thinking of the North Vietnamese "adversary." I conceived of my visit in these terms, finding such a conception reciprocated in North Vietnam where we were both welcomed as guests and respected as Americans. Such a reception was a profoundly moving personal experience. It was moving partly because the suffering and devastation caused in North Vietnam by the United States is so pervasive and appalling. Almost every Vietnamese whom we met had sustained some very immediate family loss owing to the war, if not a death or maiming, then at least a prolonged separation from loved ones. A basic human reality in North Vietnam is separation, families torn asunder; at minimum, wives and children distributed over the countryside, quite often some part of a family living in complete isolation on the other side of the Seventeenth Parallel. The initial impression a visitor receives in North Vietnam is the human concreteness of the war's

significance; even for the politically eminent in Hanoi, the war is not conceived primarily in abstract terms of ideology or geopolitics. A visitor to Hanoi finds no images of falling dominos.

Another impression – one that cannot be easily sensed at this distance – is the character and impact of warfare that follow from the awesome technological gap between the United States and North Vietnam. American air power is virtually unchallenged in North Vietnam except around the major cities. We spent a day in the town of Phat Diem, reported to us as having been bombed 406 times, and defended only by defense militia armed with single-bolt rifles. It is a difficult experience for an American to walk through the rubble of churches and convents at Phat Diem. To find a comparable example of a modern technological state waging war against a predominantly agricultural, virtually defenseless society, it is necessary to go back to the war of Italy against Ethiopia in the 1930s. The Vietnam war, of course, is on a far vaster scale. One must go through the village countryside to experience the brutal impact of the war on North Vietnam, and of course the devastation of South Vietnam is far worse. How does one explain bombing patterns directed against village communities? How are we to comprehend the use of anti-personnel bombs, napalm, and delayed-action bombs against rural areas that are far from supply lines and remote from battlefields? Who gave the orders to bomb Phat Diem? And what was the rationale? Americans will need to confront these questions sooner or later. It will not long assuage our moral conscience to purport ignorance or impotence. For the documentary record is building toward an overwhelming case. Let the skeptical consult John Gerassi's carefully evidenced book *North Vietnam: A Documentary*.[1]

A conversation in Hanoi hardly ever begins in the twentieth century. The Vietnamese are extraordinarily conscious of their history, especially of their many struggles through the centuries to beat off foreign invaders, beginning with the heroic exploits of the thirteenth century against three waves of Mongol invaders. The current war with the United States is placed in a historical setting created by the long dark night of French colonialism that lasted from the 1860s to the 1950s, and included the interim experience of Japanese occupation during World War II and Chinese Nationalist and British postwar reoccupation. The Vietnamese date their current struggle from the August Revolution of 1945, when Ho Chi Minh issued the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence, modeled in tone and language upon our earlier American

[1] New York, Bobbs-Merrill, 1968; for an anthology of newspaper accounts of "war crimes" committed in South Vietnam, see *In the Name of America* (study commissioned by Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam), Annandale, Virginia, Turnpike Press, 1968.

document of the same name which is explicitly invoked as a precedent.[2] The French restoration of colonial dominion was looked upon by Vietnamese nationalists as a deceitful repudiation of the Fontainebleau Agreements of 1946 that had gone a long way toward confirming Vietnam's right to be an independent nation. The war of independence against the French was an immediate, inevitable sequel. The North Vietnamese defeated the French finally and dramatically at Dien Bien Phu after eight long years of hardship and warfare against overwhelming military odds.[3] By that time, in 1954, the United States was heavily involved on the French side of the war, paying 80 percent of the bills and exerting an increasing influence on the politics of the struggle. American presidential leadership never accepted the defeat of French colonialism. As the peace talks in Geneva were proceeding (the conference itself being held in opposition to American wishes), United States diplomacy was seeking support from the British for Operation Vulture, a proposed heavy air strike against the Vietminh. The United States government refused the political ratification of the French military defeat that occurred at Geneva in 1954. By placing Ngo Dinh Diem in control of the Saigon regime, by rushing in funds and advice, and by organizing SEATO, the United States evolved "its commitment," and gave evidence of its intention to deny the Vietminh the fruits of their victory against the French (just as the Seventh Fleet has denied the Peking regime the natural outcome of victory in the Chinese civil war). The point is that the leadership in Hanoi is very conscious of the fact that their struggle for national independence has been a continuous one since the end of World War II. They believe that Americans have assumed the colonial role of the French, and that the Vietnamese on the American side are mainly the same people and interest groups that were on the French side before 1954.

Perhaps the strongest feeling that I had on boarding the International Control Commission plane to leave Hanoi on June 28 was that peace in Vietnam could be (and could have been) rapidly and "honorably" attained if the United States government could be (or could have been) induced to make a reasonable effort. The question that follows from such a feeling is how to induce that reasonable effort. This piece tries to make clear, on the basis of my trip, some of the grounds of this belief in the attainability of peace.

[2] For text of the Vietnamese Declaration of Independence of September 2, 1945, see George McT. Kahin and John W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam*, New York, Delta, 1967, Appendix I, pp. 345–47.

[3] On this period up until 1954, see Ellen Hammer, *The Struggle for Indochina, 1940–1955*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, rev. ed., 1966; Jean Lacouture and Philippe Devillers, *La fin d'une guerre, Indochine 1954*, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1960; and Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, New York, Praeger, 1967, Vol. I.

Each day Vietnamese and Americans die; each day the political passions loosed by this war in both societies are further inflamed; and daily countless more wounds are inflicted.

In thinking about peace in Vietnam, it is necessary to begin by reporting on the reaction in Hanoi to President Johnson's speech of March 31, 1968. The good faith of the United States government is held in serious doubt. North Vietnamese point out that, as soon as Hanoi indicated its willingness to negotiate, the United States backed away from its oft-repeated pledge to meet "at any forum, at any time." They mention that early in April a widely proclaimed military sweep was organized in South Vietnam under the peace-defying rubric Operation Certain Victory. Far more serious to the leadership in Hanoi, however, has been the contrast between the bombing patterns against North Vietnam and President Johnson's continuing claim that the geographical limitation of bombing to the area below the Twentieth Parallel constituted a major act of unilateral restraint on the part of the United States. They stress the fact that the number of missions flown against North Vietnamese territory and the per month tonnage of delivered bombs have actually *increased* since March 31. This circumstance is acutely aggravated by the fact that the panhandle region north of the DMZ is a heavily populated area that has been subjected to saturation bombing, some villages having been bombed by now between 2,000 and 3,000 times. Reports and films of the bombed zone reveal the enormity of the suffering caused to civilian village communities by these air attacks.

Miss Ta Anh Hoa, a pediatrician who had just returned from a visit to the bombed area south of the Twentieth Parallel, told of the conditions that she found. Her account left a deep impression upon us; she is a non-political young woman of warmth and simplicity. To give some suggestion, I include a short excerpt from my transcription of her words: "We conducted a medical examination of children living there. We reached conclusions that if published would increase the hatred of mothers all over the world against the United States government. If there is anything in the world that strikes against our humanity, it is to commit crimes against children . . . Through our investigation we found injuries so horrible that one can't believe it – children living year after year in darkness beneath the ground in tunnels, some nearsighted, others with twisted spines . . . children who have never seen the sun although we have much sun in Vietnam."

The special military justification for heavy bombing north of the DMZ was mainly removed, certainly by the end of June, as a result of the US withdrawal from Khe Sanh. It is not a convincing response to say, as the American military has said, that the bombing weather has improved since March 31; certainly

the avowed intention to deescalate is feeble if it yields to favorable flying conditions. North Vietnamese officials say with vehemence that the United States is trying to fool public opinion by pretending a peace initiative without taking any of the steps that would bring the war to a negotiated end.

When one moves beyond this attitude of skepticism about United States good faith, several points that bear on settlement emerge rather clearly. As has been said so often, the first step to peace in Vietnam entails the halt of all bombing of North Vietnam. The Prime Minister of North Vietnam, Mr. Pham Van Dong, amply confirmed this precondition to substantive negotiations in the course of our long discussion: "It is for us a test of whether the United States wants to deescalate. It is not possible to give reciprocity. There is nothing for us to give." More significantly, the Prime Minister went on to say that "the United States government must recognize the principle of stopping the war. From this all problems can be solved in the wisest and most intelligent way. If the United States wants to make war we are resolved to fight for as much time as required. But we also know how to talk if that is desired."

The demand that bombing stop before peace talks begin is closely connected, I think, with the Prime Minister's emphasis on "the principle of stopping the war." A halt to the bombing of North Vietnam would be taken as evidence of a real intention by the United States to bring the war to an end; without that intention the North Vietnamese look upon negotiations as concerned primarily with dampening public opposition to the war without abandoning the pursuit of a military solution. Once the United States makes evident its intention to end the war, then the North Vietnamese appear disposed to be very flexible about working out a plan, and granting concessions in return. Both Hanoi and Front officials emphasized to underscore their own flexibility that they were prepared to be "realistic" and "reasonable" about the outcome of peace talks, and I think they have already conceded to the United States certain central aspects of a viable settlement. Part of my purpose here is to call attention to these concessions that have so far been glossed over even by critics of the war.

How is reasonableness to be measured? What is the United States entitled to expect from the peace settlement? North Vietnam imposes some hard negotiating conditions in exchange for giving ground on other principal objectives. The most important condition that will not be waived by North Vietnam is an insistence on the removal from South Vietnam of the present Saigon rulers; there was no hint of a willingness to consider a coalition that includes the Thieu–Ky group, nor was there evident any willingness to allow these leaders to remain at large in Vietnam after peace does come. The leaders in Saigon are looked upon as either residues of the old colonial–feudal social order of reactionary Vietnam or merely as "agents" of United States control. Such

an image is reinforced by the recollection that many prominent members of the military junta fought for the French and against the Vietminh in the war of national independence between 1946 and 1954. Only the top echelon of Saigonese leadership must leave South Vietnam after peace to avoid punishment. Beyond this group, said to number under 100, both the Program and leaders of the Front and those of North Vietnam emphasize a broad willingness to work with the diverse elements of Vietnamese society, including people who have fought or worked for the various regimes in the South. As Pham Van Dong emphasized, "the Front is trying its best to win over its opponents and it shows great concern because these men are also Vietnamese." On no issue did the Prime Minister appear more insistent than on the prospect of reprisals: "It is unthinkable to use reprisals against those who remain. Why? Such a policy is unwise and inhuman. I assure you of this. You may tell this to the American people." Mr. Pham Van Dong is a strong and convincing presence; his words had a ring of authenticity. He also pointed out that, when the victorious Vietminh assumed control of North Vietnam, no reprisals were taken against those who sided with the French, despite the bitterness of that long war.

If we assume that an anti-Thieu–Ky coalition government emerges in postwar South Vietnam, then it would be unrealistic to expect that no reprisals would be carried out, especially at the district and local level. There has been too much bitterness and hostility on all sides to expect a pacific transition from present circumstances of strife to a condition of stable government without some accompanying bloodshed. A postwar atmosphere of continuing struggle is almost inevitable for South Vietnam, and should enter into realistic calculations for ending the war. Such a prospect of limited reprisal has to be compared with the burdens of an indefinite continuation of warfare at high levels of intensity. Also, it should be appreciated that this sequel to the war would happen whenever a settlement was reached and regardless of which side prevailed. The assurances of Pham Van Dong on the issue of reprisals, especially if such a commitment could be embodied in the final instrument of settlement, might help ensure that whatever reprisals did take place were a result of local conditions rather than an official expression of revenge and retaliation. Although accounts differ, it is apparently true that most of the bloodshed in North Vietnam after 1954 was a by-product of forced collectivization of agriculture rather than part of a program of reprisal directed against those Vietnamese who had collaborated with the French.[4] Some political purges did take place, however, and were directed especially at the leadership

[4] For a short account of this period, see Kahin and Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam*, pp. 87–92, n. 2.

of strongly anti-communist nationalist groups, the main rivals of the Vietminh in the competition for political dominance in North Vietnam.

An attitude of reconciliation was also expressed by Nguyen Van Hieu, head of the NLF Mission on Cambodia, a former professor of mathematics and a keen, articulate spokesman. As evidence that the climate for reconciliation was improving, Professor Hieu cited the fact that people siding with the Saigon regime have been muting their criticism of the Front. He observed that since the Tet offensive in February of 1968, "not one general [in the South Vietnam army] has publicly taken a position against the NLF; not even one divisional commander has said a word against the Front." Hieu felt that there was now a "great possibility to enlarge the Front" by including elements representing additional forces in South Vietnam. Finally, Hieu, portrayed as the leading Front spokesman in the French film on the NLF by Roger Pic, said, "Anyone who opposes the presence of United States troops can participate in government."

The minimum role of the Front in the settlement process is difficult to specify precisely. Pham Van Dong said that Hanoi "can discuss the general principles of peace, but on concrete questions the Front must have its say. The Front is doing the fighting and it will have a decisive voice as to the future of South Vietnam." A similar position was taken by Nguyen Van Tien, head of the NLF Mission in Hanoi, a prematurely white-haired man of subtle mind and impressive knowledge. Mr. Tien described the military situation in South Vietnam as one in which the Front substantially controls the countryside and also claims large portions of the cities as "liberated areas." These areas cannot yet be specifically claimed, Tien says, because they would in that event be quickly destroyed by US firepower. Independent French correspondents with whom I talked in Paris tended to accept these NLF claims as accurate.

Both Mr. Tien and Professor Hieu argued that the Saigon regime is presently very isolated, lacking any social or political base in Vietnamese society. It is in this context that they regard the formation of the Alliance of National, Democratic, and Peace Forces as an important new political development. The importance of the Alliance for these Front officials lay in the fact that leading personalities drawn from professional, religious, business, intellectual, and student sectors of urban society made a political commitment that reflected their judgment as to the domestic balance of forces in South Vietnam. Unlike North Vietnamese government officials, the representatives of the Front did not seem to look upon the Alliance with unmixed enthusiasm, nor did they mention its possible participation in a coalition government. It seemed clear that Mr. Tien, for instance, partly regarded the leaders of the Alliance as latecomers leaping aboard a bandwagon when compared to

the leaders of the Front who had been in the jungle fighting and dying for almost a decade. I felt, also, that there may be some difference in socioeconomic outlook that would make the Front wary of working too closely with the Alliance. The Chairman of the Alliance, a lawyer named Trinh Dinh Thao, is from one of the richest landowning families in South Vietnam, as is one of its two Vice Chairmen, Lam Van Tot.

In the aftermath of the Second Honolulu Conference, it is more important than ever that Americans gain a proper appreciation of the importance of the Alliance of National, Democratic, and Peace Forces.[5] The formation of the Alliance was officially announced in April of 1968 as a direct consequence of the Tet offensive. Its leadership is drawn mainly from Saigon and Hue, and consists of respected and widely known non-Communist personalities; the Alliance is led by individuals who must be regarded as members of the South Vietnamese "establishment." The Thieu–Ky government has itself hinted at the importance of the Alliance by taking the extraordinary step of condemning ten of its leaders to death *in absentia* in a summary trial conducted before a military tribunal in Saigon on July 12, 1968.

Official American reactions have discounted the Alliance as a front of the Front, as a trick and delusion. Washington's reaction has been given some support by such influential journalists as Gene Roberts and Hedrick Smith (*New York Times*, July 9, 12, and 14, 1968), and Robert Shaplen (the *New Yorker*, June 29, 1968). Their reports have discounted the Alliance because it adopts a political line that resembles the Program of the NLF, and because the radio and press transmissions of the Alliance have been carried and endorsed by the official media of the Front and of North Vietnam. It would be a serious mistake to undervalue the Alliance because the evidence suggests that it might provide the leadership for a substantial third force in South Vietnam. It would also be a mistake because the North Vietnamese endorsement of the program of the Alliance may itself be an important political signal.

[5] It is important because Presidents Johnson and Thieu issued a joint communiqué at Honolulu on July 20, 1968, in which it was said that "the United States will not support the imposition of a 'Coalition Government' or any other form of Government on the people of South Vietnam." For text of the Honolulu Communiqué, see the *New York Times*, July 21, 1968, p. 2. Such a statement, if it only refers to the "imposition" of a coalition government, is certainly not objectionable. It is objectionable, however, if the criterion for what is imposition is to be determined by the Saigon regime. Given the criminal prosecution of political moderates in South Vietnam shortly after the Honolulu meeting (see p. 16 for reference to conviction of Truong Dinh Dzu), it appears evident that the Thieu regime is seeking to eliminate from view any major candidates for participation in a coalition. In fact, in South Vietnam, as of July 1968, it is a crime to advocate a coalition government that includes NLF participation.

The first question that needs to be asked is why the admittedly non-Communist leadership of the Alliance, drawn from the urban upper classes, would put in jeopardy their lives, families, reputations, and properties by forming an underground political group that takes a position similar to that of the National Liberation Front. There are really only two plausible responses. First, that the domestic balance of forces in South Vietnam is so unfavorable to the Saigon–United States alignment that it has become expedient for non-Communist elements to identify themselves with the prevailing side in the latter stages of the struggle. This was the explanation that seemed to appeal to Mr. Tien. The second explanation is that the Tet offensive of February 1968 demonstrated clearly that urban groups could not safely remain aloof from the war any longer. The destructive impact of Tet on the cities provided urban leaders with a dramatic occasion on which to take sides in the struggle raging for the control of Vietnam.

The persuasiveness of this explanation of the Alliance rests on the assumption that the war in Vietnam has so polarized the domestic politics of South Vietnam that the only political choices are to side either with the US–Saigon position or with the DRV–NLF position. By spring 1968, all middle positions had been rendered irrelevant. It has long been evident that moderate antiwar leaders who, like Truong Dinh Dzu, participate openly in politics will be put into jail sooner or later.[6] Mr. Dzu, the opposition candidate who was the runner-up in the 1967 elections, has been sentenced to five years of hard labor in prison. His crime? Advocating direct peace talks with the NLF, and favoring a coalition government as part of a peace settlement.

Given this domestic setting, the formation of the Alliance was necessarily both clandestine and anti-regime. Pham Van Dong emphasized in our discussions that "it is a great victory for us that the leaders of the Alliance chose our side." He went on to say that "the Alliance is just the sort of civilian grouping of influential citizens that the United States has been trying to form for years." The Prime Minister felt that the emergence of the Alliance was an important political indicator of the domestic balance of forces in South Vietnam. It misses most of this point to worry about how distinct the Alliance is from the Front. Given the severity of war conditions in South Vietnam, it is to be expected that active entry into the arena would be in terms of an affiliation rather than as a completely distinct entity. As such, there would be no

[6] For an account of the three-hour military trial of Mr. Dzu, see the *New York Times*, July 27, 1968, p. 6. See also the report of the trial and conviction of a student editor, Nguyen Truong Con, who, like Mr. Dzu, was "charged" with urging a coalition government (*New York Times*, July 26, 1968, p. 6).