Vietnam Will Win

An Interview With Frank Joyce

Liberation News Service

1970

Note: Frank Joyce, former news editor of the Fifth Estate and a member of People Against Racism, just returned from a 10-day visit to Hanoi. There, along with three other anti-war activists—Charlotte Bunche Weeks of Washington, D.C, Women's Liberation, Elizabeth Sutherland of El Grito del Norte, and Jerry Schwinn of the Committee of Returned Volunteers—Joyce met with dozens of Indochinese revolutionaries.

These included officials of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam. The four-person delegation visited various parts of the city of Hanoi as well as rural areas in Nghe An Province.

LNS: You were in Hanoi during a very critical time, as far as world events are concerned. What was your sense of how these events affected the Vietnamese?

JOYCE: We were in Hanoi in as critical and as key a period as one can imagine being there. Shortly after we arrived, the Indochina summit conference was being held. We were taken to the mass rally at which the Indochina Summit Conference declaration was read and the results of the conference announced to a meeting of high ranking officials and officers of mass organizations.

We were told that this was the most important political meeting that had taken place certainly in 1970, and, in some sense, since the funeral of Ho Chi Minh. It was a very impressive meeting, which was attended by Pham Van Dong and the entire delegation which had been in South China at the- summit conference by representatives of the Pathet Lao and the PRG (Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam).

Secondly, we were present at the time when intensive bombing was resumed in Nghe An province and the province immediately to the south.

Thirdly, we were there at the time that the Cambodian invasion took place.

And lastly the thing which led on the last day we were there to some very good discussion, the thing about which the Vietnamese, at least those from the Solidarity Committee with whom we spent the greatest of our time were most emotionally and passionately clearly upset and concerned about, was the killing of four students at Kent State, which took place the night before we left and which we were told about the morning we left.

And it's interesting, it sounds trite—things that seem natural in Vietnam sound trite here—but out of their humanity the Vietnamese take very personally every casualty of the U.S. movement, in a sense much more emotionally than they take their own casualties. One gets the sense that they are sort of sorry they brought it all on us—it's really an incredible sensation.

We also met for a full day with representatives Of the PRG with whom we had also met for an afternoon in Paris, representatives at the peace talks. I am telling you all this to give some flavor of the kind of people we talked to and the kind of briefings that we had.

LNS: What did you learn at these briefings?

JOYCE: First and most important, let me talk about what we're pretty clear are the reasons Nixon felt it was necessary to make the invasion into Cambodia. And that is, simply stated, the complete and utter contradiction between the military reality of Indochina and the political reality of the U.S.

The military reality of Indochina hasn't changed—the Vietnamese and the Laotians and now the Cambodians continue to win. The U.S. continues to be militarily defeated. It's not widely known, but the attack ratio of attacks in the south from the period April 1 to April 20 was very high—there were 1,200 attacks in total against both U.S. and ARVN military installations. That's an average of 60 attacks a day, demonstrating the capacity that the Vietnamese do have to strike anywhere any time.

The U.S. reported that two days after Ellsworth Bunker left to come back to the U.S. for briefings, there was a rocket attack which hit less than a kilometer from his residence, which is one of the most heavily fortified areas in all-of Saigon. So again, the NLF—the Peoples Liberation Armed Forces—have the capacity to hit anywhere and have the capacity to inflict high casualties. The casualty figures for the week of the Cambodian invasion itself in Vietnam were the highest in a year—863, if I remember correctly, ARVN casualties and 168 Americans killed and a thousand and some wounded. And those figures were only slightly higher than the preceding week.

So the military situation in the South and in all of Indochina, going back to the Plain of Jars exchange with Laos, for example, in February, to the Lon Nol government in Cambodia, which is certainly not a stable government, not one which necessarily could or can stand without outside protection—all of these had obviously led Nixon to have serious doubts about the so-called Vietnamization policy and about the actual ability to begin substantive troop withdrawals.

The U.S. is utterly and completely threatened with the fact that it has never changed its objectives in Indochina, has only altered its strategy. It has never changed its objectives since the time it first gave aid to the French. It's a story that is well known and has been documented before, but it bears repeating that every strategy including Vietnamization has failed.

LNS: What do they feel about how the anti-war movement has responded to all this?

JOYCE: First, the PRG people in particular I think are somewhat—angry isn't the right word, but for lack of a better one—angry at the U.S. movement because they believe:

(1) That we don't really follow the war closely enough, which is certainly true, and (2) that we keep waiting and being dependent on spectaculars like Dien Bien Phu and the Tet Offensive, whereas, as they point out, if we really followed the war closely we would understand that they are having military success after military success, but they are not at the spectacular level which the U.S. media will present in the way that they did in Tet or further back in Dien Bien Phu.

And as a result there is a certain kind of demoralization which has set into the U.S. anti-war movement. This was evidenced in part in the utterly irresponsible dissolution of the Vietnam Moratorium Committee but also within the so-called anti-imperialist segments of the movement. We really do not follow the war very closely and we really don't have a sense of where it's at militarily or otherwise.

They also point out that we don't follow the political situation very well either. And they stress very strongly the instability of the Thieu-Ky regime, which certainly is true and is evidenced by the new forces in motion against the government in the South—for example, the students and the veterans' demonstration. When you stop to think about it, that was really an incredible event—invalids in wheelchairs and crutches in the streets of Saigon protesting about the kind of treatment they get. It was confirmed by Western journalists who we encountered in Vientiane and elsewhere, that Saigon is an absolutely disastrous state. The population continues to grow, there are people building huts on the sidewalks for places to live. It's a very unstable situation.

We got reports, again confirmed by Western journalists, of growing instances of fighting between ARVN troops and Western troops in Saigon and also in the provinces. The level of anti-Americanism, while not necessarily meaning a drop in the level of some forces of anti-communism, is growing. There is just utter disgust with the fact of U.S. presence. The level of dissention among U.S. troops is reaching new highs.

This adds to the tremendous pressure on Nixon for withdrawal. But, again, the U.S. objectives haven't changed. They still want to maintain military, political and economic control of Indochina and that is the contradiction there.

LNS: How did you assess the American situation for the Vietnamese?

JOYCE: We found it a useful concept in trying to explain our assessment of where things were at in the U.S. to talk to the Vietnamese about what we consider to be the Saigonization of the U.S. BY which we meant it's kind of gimmicky, but when you stop to think about it, it's kind of useful—Vietnamization has kind of boomeranged, and more and more, the U.S. gets like Saigon.

Thieu and Ky are obviously interchangeable with Nixon and Agnew, and in fact, maybe we ought to propose a trade. And the major factor contributing to instability in Saigon is inflation—that obviously has parallels here—as does the growing intensity of the repression, which was shown by the torture of the Saigon students, as well as by the growing intensity of the repression of the various tendencies and strains of the movement in the U.S.

The Vietnamese see the next period of six months at the longest as really decisive.

LNS: Specifically, what is their perspective?

JOYCE: There's really only two options, Nixon's options are narrower and narrower every day. He goes into Cambodia because he's got to grasp at anything at all which the military tells him will in fact help secure the Vietnamization strategy. It means accepting the whole mythology of the sanctuaries and the idea of "we'll find the COSVN Headquarters"—there's every reason to believe that he believed that—in the sense he was being quite open about what the objectives of the Cambodian invasion were. There is some irony in that at a lot of levels.

One bit of irony comes out of the fact that the PRG and the NLF are never conceded any legitimacy whatsoever by the U.S. There is never acknowledgement of the fact that they are the de facto government of most of South Vietnam. Now, when they were claiming that they had actually found a part of the COSVN headquarters a couple of days ago, they offered as proof that they had discovered part of the central post office.

Well, to concede that there is a functioning postal system run by the NLF is needless to say contrary to what's generally been conceded by the U.S. about the capacity of the PRG to actually govern the country. And there's lots of those little contradictions of that sort which have accumulated and which lead to this kind of desperation. Again, to try to make this point clear—either the U.S. is going to actually reduce its sights and its ambitious imperial objectives in Indochina in the coming period, or the Cambodian invasion is only the first sign of a growing desperation to make this failing strategy work.

That means—and the Vietnamese were very clear about this—that beginning with the Cambodian coup, a sort of inexorable act of events was unleashed. As a consequence, the anti-imperialist movement in this country must understand that we don't jump from this crisis through a long lull and wait for the next one.

The Cambodian invasion is the beginning of a series of crises and key points—which may emerge in a lot of different places. The next crises may emerge in Laos, it may emerge in Cambodia, it may emerge in the resumption of conventional bombing of North Vietnam, of Haiphong and Hanoi for example.

LNS: What does this mean for American radicals?

JOYCE: I think it all adds up to a very clear conclusion for the anti-war and the anti-imperialist movement, and I've been saying this at every opportunity. And that is that it is necessary to press for the commitment to immediate withdrawal much more intensely than we have, because immediate withdrawal is in fact, given the present logic and direction of U.S. policy and events, the only way to avoid the use of nuclear weapons.

Because that's where it's headed and there's a chain of events that go from Cambodia to the use of at least tactical nuclear weapons. Because in fact nuclear weapons are the only thing which would win the U.S. military position in Indochina. That's just a fact. Nothing short of that will do it, clearly.

If we do not succeed in producing an absolutely unbreakable commitment to disengagement and to withdrawal from Vietnam, then that acquires a kind of inevitability. I don't want to be apocalyptic, but

it does acquire a kind of inevitability. And the question there is not can we have an intense outrage after the fact as we did in Cambodia.

I think it's very important that we've got to think very seriously during the summer months and particularly during the November elections about an anti-war strategy that's related to various possibilities that may come up very quickly. Because of the very real possibility of nuclear weapons, we have got to think about preventive anti-war actions and not just reactive stuff to the next atrocity.

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Fifth Estate #107, June 11–24, 1970

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