

“I am the Viet Cong”

Raymond Mungo

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Editor's note: Dave Dellinger, editor of *Liberation* magazine, arranged in Hanoi last spring for a group of Americans to meet with the North Vietnamese and members of the NLF in a midway meeting point—which developed to be Bratislava, Czechoslovakia. The Americans were drawn from the peace movement, the black liberation movement, university professors, community organizers, clergy, artists and film-makers. Raymond Mungo, former editor of the Boston University News, participated and spoke on behalf of the Liberation News Service.

Bratislava, Czechoslovakia (Liberation News Service)—“Lyndon Johnson will have a nightmare when he hears about this meeting,” said Tom Hayden, former president of Students for a Democratic Society, to 40 Americans and an equal number of North Vietnamese and members of the National Liberation Front (NLF). “He will have a nightmare because he has sent 500,000 men to your land to find the Vietcong.”

“We will tell him he'd better leave some men at home. Because, like Spartacus, whose fellow slaves in Rome protected his hiding place by each claiming to be Spartacus himself, I am the Vietcong. We are everywhere! We are all the Vietcong!”

And on that note, the first major meeting between Americans and the “enemies” of their government ended on September 13 after 10 days here of cultural shock, political programs, and fraternal exchanges. The American delegation, led by Dave Dellinger, was moved and at times incredulous at the Vietnamese morale and willingness to resist in face of monstrous military force. The Vietnamese, for their part, recognize the relative smallness of the anti-war movement but foresee its growth as the ultimate solution to the U.S. intervention in their affairs.

“We can speak to you, dear friends, as brothers,” began Nguyen Minh Vy, chairman of the Northern delegation, as he threw his arms around Dellinger. Gifts were exchanged, or more properly lavished, as each side delighted in pleasing the other. Books, sketches of South Vietnam produced on elaborate underground “liberation presses,” phonograph records, pins, rings made of debris of downed U.S. planes, clothing, letters from captured U.S. pilots for delivery to their families on one side; on the other, anti war pins, books, pamphlets, and little black dolls from Freedom House. A wizened sixtyish Vietnamese woman (who kept asking “when the women will all get together”) grins broadly, pointing to her SDS badge.

Time and again the Vietnamese overcame American embarrassment at the apparent impotence of the conference to affect U.S. policy by insisting they were talking to the real people of America—the blacks, the community organizers, the students, the poor. These Americans, our war — torn friends said, will some day lead their people in peace and brotherhood with all the world. They said they knew the struggle may be long, but the Vietnamese will wait and watch—they have waited thousands of years already—and we must be strong and return the good fight.

The Dom Rekreachie ROH, our hotel, is normally a refuge for trade-unionists and overlooks the Danube; beer and wine were plentiful and superb. The Vietnamese and Americans alike were apologetic for indulging in such unaccustomed luxury. The former, convinced that Americans “dress very well,” bought expensive suits and raincoats in Europe; they were surprised that we wore dungaree jackets and tattered sandals and complimented our “humility as well as courage.”

At the end, 10 Americans were selected to go to Hanoi, but others may follow later. Rightfully proud of their strength under duress, the Vietnamese were anxious that their new friends see their homeland for themselves.

They understand frustration, had no difficulty encompassing the frustrations that Americans feel at so simple a task as ending the war, and attempted to comfort us. We were at an understandable loss to offer them tangible comfort, but Ross Flanagan of the Quaker Action Group persevered with small packages of medical supplies which were seized by Royal Canadian Mounted Police last month as they were being brought into Canada for shipment to Hanoi.

Considering the difficult political tasks ahead, though, some comforts seemed justifiable, and so both delegations joined in singing “We Shall Overcome” with locked arms—the first time in years that a chorus of “We shall brothers be” has been sung without embarrassment—and we joined them in a snake-dance version of the Unity Song.

The final evening, a formal Czech reception at Bratislava’s oldest and most elegant castle turned into a New York-style frug, Slovak violinists notwithstanding, and Vietnamese brothers clapped and laughed uninhibitedly—recognizing a cultural tradition when they see one—while the heads of state stood by, powerless to stop what obviously seemed to them a desecration of socialist realism and diplomatic protocol.

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