

Vietnam—Why? Why Not

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I would like at this time to point out what I believe to be the central considerations involved in my position that the United States is totally unjustified in pursuing its current policy in Vietnam.

To begin with, the resumption of bombings of North Vietnam can lead only to escalation and intensification of the already dangerous war in Vietnam. Three presidents have warned us of the dangers of an all-out war on mainland Southeast Asia; and yet, this is exactly the situation which the United States is now confronting.

According to the *New York Times* of February 26, "Saigon officials estimate in their planning that the war will last from three to seven years. Air strikes in North Vietnam and Laos are to be continued. United States troops will be permitted to enter Cambodia in pursuit of Vietcong forces and North Vietnamese units that are reported to be based there."

Besides predicting the further expansion of the war into Laos and Cambodia, the *New York Times* states that officials in Saigon are wondering whether the American people will tolerate the casualties that are foreseen in the projected military operations. During periods of maximum combat effort, it is expected that American casualties will average each month about 400 to 500 dead and about 15,000 wounded.

Finally, quoting from the *Detroit Free Press*, February 9, Lt. Gen. James M. Gavin repeatedly told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that, in his opinion, the Johnson administration would risk war with Communist China by a large-scale increase of American troops in Vietnam. He painted a dismal picture of the nuclear catastrophe that could result from war with China. Ultimately, he said, the Soviet Union would be drawn in.

Perhaps these risks would be justifiable if they were incurred by effective and necessary actions in the pursuit of an honorable and vital objective. However, first of all, these measures cannot be effective. George Kennan, the principal author of the containment policy of the 1960s and an authority on world Communism, testified before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee on February 11: "I have great misgivings about any deliberate expansion of hostilities on our part directed to the achievement of something called 'victory'—if by the use of that term, we envisage the complete disappearance of the recalcitrance with which we are now faced, the formal submission of the adversary to our will, and the complete realization of our present stated political aims. I doubt that these things can be achieved even by the most formidable military successes."

Furthermore, these measures are not being taken in pursuit of an honorable or vital objective. Quoting again from Kennan's statement: "The first point I should like to make is that if we were not already involved as we are today in Vietnam, I would know of no reason why we should wish to become so involved, and I can think of several reasons why we should wish not to. Vietnam is not a region of major military-industrial importance. Even a situation in which South Vietnam was controlled exclusively by the Vietcong, would not present, in my opinion, dangers great enough to justify our direct military intervention. There is every likelihood that a Communist regime in South Vietnam would follow a fairly independent political course. From the long-term standpoint, therefore, and on principle, I think our military involvement in Vietnam has to be recognized as unfortunate."

Our involvement in Vietnam is far more than 'unfortunate.' Our commitment to intervene in Vietnam began as a violation of the international law established by the Geneva Accords of 1954, which prohibited the introduction

of foreign troops into Vietnam, and of the national law of the U.S. constitution, which states explicitly that only congress shall declare war. It remains a commitment to support a government which does not have the support of its own people. According to Neil Sheehan, *New York Times* correspondent in Saigon, February 20: "Without real control over its own rural population, the Saigon government will remain weak and totally dependent on American support and will never be in any position to successfully compete with formidable Communist political, administrative, and military machine." Thus, in the words of George Kennan, our commitment is an "obligation not only to defend the frontiers of a certain foreign political entity. but to assure the internal security of its government in circumstances of where that government is unable to assure that security by its own means."

The so-called pacification program will not resolve the unpopularity of the Saigon military government. According to the *New York Times* of February 11: "As the Vietnamese see pacification, its core is not merely 'helping the people to a better life,' the aspect of which many American speakers have dwelled. It is rather the destruction of the clandestine Vietcong political structure and the creation of an ironlike system of government political control over the population." According to one pacification program official, "It's a little bit totalitarian, but the idea is to tie each person to some kind of controlled organization." This type of 'pacification' has not succeeded in the past, as demonstrated by the strategic hamlet program and other attempts; it will not now succeed in winning the people over to the dictatorial Ky government.

Our commitment in Vietnam is thus an unjustifiable commitment to suppress democracy in violation of law and of the stated principles of our country. The administration's main justification for the resumption of the bombings of North Vietnam rests on the failure of President Johnson's so-called peace offensive. Yet, even this justification completely collapses under close scrutiny. As the *New York Times* of February 26 states, "Official planning in Saigon no longer takes account of any possibility of peace negotiations with the Vietcong. It is felt that the president's peace offensive was undertaken to demonstrate that the Communists are not interested in negotiations and to assuage public opinion."

We do not have to rely on such statements for evidence of the insincerity of the peace offensive. Further evidence can be found in both the actions and the words of the administration during and after the peace offensive. First, it is apparent that the Administration has been preparing for a prolonged military struggle in Vietnam. According to *Aviation Week* of January 3, "Current construction of five new permanent air bases and two new port facilities in South Vietnam and Thailand reflect a U.S. recognition that it must be prepared for a long-term military commitment in Southeast Asia." Even during the period of the peace offensive, the United States was extending this military commitment. Michigan Congressman Lucien Nedzi in a statement of January 18, referring to the landing of 45,000 soldiers in Vietnam, remarked: "This is, I regret to say, a grave tactical political error. This buildup cannot be crucial to our short-term security needs. It could have waited until a conclusive 'Yes' or 'No' had been given by the Communists to our offers to negotiate. Although the peace drive continues, we have provided considerable fuel to Hanoi's charges that the President's peace offer is merely a camouflage for deeper U.S. military involvement."

Finally, the administration has ignored at least two indications that North Vietnam might be willing to come to the peace table. First of all, during the period of the peace offensive, it was reported that no North Vietnamese troops were being encountered in battle; President Johnson, when questioned about this at a news conference, replied that he was aware of these reports. Could this have been a signal that North Vietnam was responding to the cessation of bombings? More concretely, quoting from the *Detroit Free Press* of February 9, "North Vietnamese president Ho Chi Minh has sent a note asking India to initiate moves in the Vietnamese War. A similar message was sent to Canada.

A spokesman at the Indian Consulate said the letter, delivered January 24, was among messages Ho sent to a number of governments including France.

The letter, expressing interest in peace moves, spurred hopes for an end to the deadly conflict." Bombings in North Vietnam were resumed January 31; why were the January 24th letters ignored?

President Johnson has made it clear that he will accept peace only if it is based on the unconditional surrender of the National Liberation front. In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, according to the *New York Times* of February 20, General Maxwell D. Taylor said that the objective of the United States was to apply enough military power to force the Communists to accept an independent and non-communistic South Vietnam. Yet in

the same issue, the *Times* points out that “the Vietcong hold military control of more than half of the countryside and strong political influence over at least a third of the people. To expect the Cong to yield these gains is, in effect, a demand for their unconditional surrender.”

Not only has the Administration refused to consider the idea that the NLF might participate in a post-war coalition government; it has also rejected the idea of NLF representation at any peace conference. And yet, according to Senator Fulbright, “Without clear assurance that they would be permitted to be party to a peace conference and to take part in elections, the Vietcong has no alternative but to continue fighting.”

It is untrue that the National Liberation Front and Hanoi are unwilling to negotiate. According to the *Detroit Free Press* of February 17, “the peace efforts of U Thant, Secretary General of the United Nations, have disclosed Hanoi’s three basic requirements for negotiations. First of these is a new pause in the United States bombing of North Vietnam. The second requirement for negotiation would be an indication that the United States has discontinued the ‘escalation’ of the ground war in South Vietnam... North Vietnam apparently would be influenced toward talks if the reinforcements by military units ended or even, perhaps, if replacements for existing units were halted. Finally, North Vietnam would require some firm assurance, public or private, that the United States and South Vietnamese governments would accept the presence of representatives.”

These demands are not unreasonable. It is only the indefensible intransigence of the United States government which necessitates the escalation and expansion of our intervention in Vietnam. United States peace offers are not unconditional when they demand the precondition of the surrender of the NLF. The NLF is not intransigent when it refuses to participate in negotiations to ratify its own surrender.

Only when our government truly recognizes the right of all the Vietnamese people to self-determination and halts entirely its illegal military intervention in Vietnam, will this war be ended. For these reasons, I am opposed to current American policy in Vietnam.

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