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A Proposal to End the Vietnam Fighting

"It is the ferocity of life at village level, with its unquenched and interlocked impulses of vengeance, that mocks the glib solution of 'coalition government,' as well as the diplomatic rigidities of Paris."

by THEODORE H. WHITE

In a few weeks, two years of futility will have elapsed at the Theater of the Absurd in Paris.

In twenty-two months of Vietnam negotiations, more than 18,000 Americans have died; countless Vietnamese have perished; and peace is no closer. Hung high on their rigid ideologies, frozen in a dialogue of the deaf, the parties to the Paris talks have buried reality in rhetoric. And the rhetoric of both barely conceals the fact that neither has offered the other anything more than impossible and humiliating surrender.

It is best, therefore, to abandon the Paris rhetoric entirely and stab for the underlying realism of Vietnamese politics. For if these politics cannot be untangled, then no solution at all is possible.

Vietnamese politics begin in the villages; the root of the deadlock there is fear; and the heart of the matter is murder—murder on a scale so merciless and enduring that few outsiders can comprehend it. Fifteen years of civil war have pitted village against village, family against family until fear is the environment of the entire countryside—fear not so much of marauding main-force battalions in the field, but of neighbor for neighbor.

This fear is invisible. Few sights are more bucolic than a Vietnamese hamlet that has not been shattered by bombs or artillery. One can wander through the dirt paths or cobbled streets of such an unscarred village, shaded by its bamboo, banana, or palm trees, its hedgerows twined with yellow or scarlet flowers, and the war seems far away. But the terror is not. In the hills beyond the rice paddies lurk guerrillas who can enter and kill by night. In the ten years, 1957-67, Vietcong executioners with their blank warrants assassinated 12,000 civilians in the villages—both the finest and the most vile of those who support the government. And the government apparatus, supported by the popular forces in their mud-ball garrisons, acting through village chiefs or police agents, can capriciously finger any Vietcong sympathizer or suspect for arrest or execution by day. Vietnam provides sanctuary for no one—no place where a man can be sure he is safe night or day; it offers nothing a man can have and be sure of holding. It is beyond human reason that the people of South Vietnam should be expected to trust each other.

It is the ferocity of life at village level, with its unquenched and interlocked impulses of vengeance, that mocks the glib solution of "coalition government," as well as the diplomatic rigidities of Paris. At the grassroots, in the streets of the hamlets, live thousands of families side by side, some of whose sons fight with the government, others with the night raiders in the hills. Hate is skin-close. A little more than two years ago, I spent an evening with a Vietnamese Civil Action Marine squad posted fifteen miles out of Danang, patrolling the village of Nam-O. All through the night, from their sandbagged wooden tower, the young Marines intermittently poked their floodlight down the village streets. The glaring light came to rest again and again on a large and solid hut no more than 300 feet down the slope. I asked what it was. They explained that it was a farmer's house; they knew two of his sons were fighting with the Vietcong, but they couldn't do anything about him. The government garrison with whom the Marines then worked thought otherwise: "That old sergeant of theirs," said one of the young Marines, "he thinks we just ought to chop him." The Marine made a chopping motion across the neck, and then added, "But we can't." How many get chopped without trial in other Vietnamese villages, no one can count.

No government in Saigon, dignified with the title of coalition government, or any other label, can protect these families in their homes. It is the local police and the night killers who count, and neither side will trust the other in administration of justice or protection of person. Nor should they—any more than Harlem should accept George Wallace as police commissioner, or Birmingham, Alabama, accept Eldridge Cleaver.

This is the root reality of Vietnamese politics.

Such politics of murder and terror in the Orient first forced themselves

THEODORE H. WHITE, whose *The Making of the President, 1960* won a Pulitzer Prize in 1962, is a veteran correspondent and political commentator.

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Laos

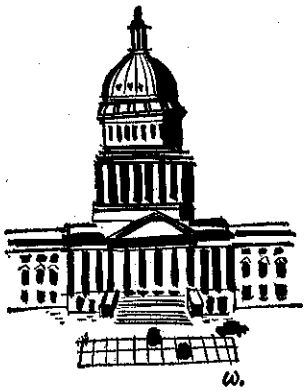
President Nixon is right in saying that knowledge of the full historical background is essential to an understanding of the present situation in Laos. His public statement on Laos reviews most of the principal events since 1949, with special emphasis on the Geneva Treaty of 1962, signed by fourteen nations, including the United States, Soviet Union, North Vietnam, Communist China, France, and the United Kingdom. The statement then cites the large-scale violations of that treaty by North Vietnam as major factors in the present fighting in Laos.

These facts are vital to any judgment on the Laotian problem in general or America's involvement in particular. But there was a large omission in the President's recital that impairs a full understanding of the historical background. This omission pertains to events following the first national elections in Laos in 1956, as a result of which Prince Souvanna Phouma became Prime Minister. The United States gave full support to the Souvanna government, spending $325-million from 1955 through 1960 in direct aid. Of this amount, 80 per cent went into military supplies or salaries; the remainder went into public health, education, agricultural improvement, and industrial development. We were seeking to strengthen a moderate government that was attempting to upgrade the social conditions of its people, under a policy that resisted ideological or other pressure from Communist China.

Then, in the summer of 1960, General Phoumi Nosavan, son-in-law of the Prime Minister of Thailand, led a military coup against the legitimate government of Souvanna Phouma. The insurgents were armed with American weapons. It was clear that the coup had U.S. support. Not only did the United States not protect the legitimate government of Souvanna Phouma; it financed the rebellion. Souvanna's government fought on. Thus began the civil war. Meanwhile, the United States was trapped by its miscalculation. For several months, the U.S. was in the bizarre and incredible position of meeting the payrolls of both armies and of supplying them with uniforms and weapons.

Before long, the U.S. openly shifted its support to the insurgents. Prime Minister Souvanna warned that, if Washington withdrew its help, he would have to turn to Moscow. In the end he did, and the United States and the Soviet Union found themselves on opposite ends of a supply line in an Asian civil war. Thirty thousand people died.

Another direct result of the war was that the Pathet Lao movement became stronger in the North. Also an indeterminate number of Laotian citizens came to associate the Pathet Lao with the goal of freedom from outside intervention or rule. There was little question that leaders of the Pathet Lao were Communist; similarly, there was little question that not everyone who supported or joined was Communist. The essential point here is that the American-supported attempt to subvert the legitimate Souvanna government not only failed, but actually succeeded in bolstering the very ideological forces we were seeking to combat.



President John F. Kennedy in 1962 took the initiative in holding direct discussions with Premier Nikita Khrushchev for the purpose of restoring the Souvanna government. Both the United States and Soviet Union agreed to disengage themselves militarily from Laos. Prince Souvanna Phouma's government was to be re-established on a coalition basis.

The full story of the events leading to the 1962 Geneva meeting was not revealed by Washington at the time but was known to other governments, including France and Great Britain, and has since become generally known piece by piece.

Our involvement in Indo-China over the years has meaning for the entire process of decision-making in U.S. foreign policy. Contrary to its history and its own Constitution, and without the knowledge or expressed desire of the American people and its Congress, the government of the United States has become involved in subversion or attempts at subversion of other governments. It happened not just in Laos. It happened in Vietnam in 1963 when President Ngo Dinh Diem was assassinated. It happened in Cambodia in 1965, according to a recent story in *The New York Times*, when U.S. secret operatives were foiled in their attempt to overthrow Prince Sihanouk.

The given justification is that we are combatting communism. How simple is it to corrupt ourselves, disfigure our own institutions, and do evil in the world so long as we can say we are trying to hurt an enemy. The trouble with accepting any justification for terrible deeds is that it tends not just to produce supposedly isolated expedients but to create something of a pattern and eventually a way of life.

If an American agency has the power to murder other heads of state, what is to stop it from turning against the American President himself? The principal effect of everything we have been doing in Indo-China—Vietnam and Laos in particular—is to undermine our society, our standing in the world, and our place in history. In the name of containing communism, we actually have been strengthening it. Is Souvanna Phouma a Communist? President Nixon says he is not. Yet we

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We lacked the power and appetite to police or enforce the agreements, to give them a chance to work; Chiang's insistence on a monolithic all-powerful central government left no alternative to us but to withdraw when he pushed his ambition beyond the federalism envisioned by Americans.

Today, the Paris proposals of both sides insist on the same winner-take-all solution—"Vietnamization" is our way of getting there, a new government in Saigon is the Communists' way of getting there. Yet a partition of South Vietnam into zones of security under a federal government is certainly a more manageable proposal for negotiating an end to fighting than discussing the total surrender terms each side now offers the other. And it is certainly much more in our capacity to buttress and maintain such a federal solution in Vietnam than it was in China.

One must start down the road to such a solution by first looking pragmatically at the politics and history of Vietnam.

Vietnam has never in modern times known any centralized state unified under its own government. Put together on the map by French conquest, savaged by French colonialism, the tormented land has succeeded in breeding only two native institutions that aspire to govern. And both of these are tainted with a cruelty bred into them by an experience utterly alien to political behavior of Americans at home.

The first institution is, of course, the Communist Party of Vietnam, both North and South. It is, certainly, the most powerful creation of the Vietnamese people—but an utterly merciless one. The early record of the Vietminh in ruthlessly eliminating other freedom-fighters and parties resistant to French colonialism dates back to the Thirties and Forties; excesses by the Communists in the North during the Fifties, after they were installed in power, are an abomination. Yet there can be no doubt that their control is an authentic expression of a huge segment of Vietnamese will—by now, surely, an unshakable majority in North Vietnam.

The second institution is equally authentic: the resistance to the Communists, shaped up in the fragile government and military dictatorship of Saigon and South Vietnam. Military dictatorships also are repellent to American taste—yet they are, in developing countries, a phase that history seems unable to eliminate. However odious the Thieu and Ky regime, with all its corruption and inefficiency, may appear to us, hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese have preferred to fight, and scores of thousands to die, on the anti-Communist side—and continue to do so.

"It hurts only when I cackle."

Setting aside North Vietnam, whose right to exist as a Communist state has never been challenged, logic leads us to an examination of reality in South Vietnam.

Of the sixteen million people who live in South Vietnam today, approximately half are Buddhists of varying sects; two million are believed to be Catholics; almost two million may belong to the Cao Dai sect; up to a million may be Hoa Hao. Refugees from the North number almost a million; aboriginal montagnards perhaps a million; ethnic Cambodians about a half-million; ethnic Chinese more than a half-million. All are gathered in a melting pot that has never melted. South Vietnam is fundamentally different from North Vietnam; it is a far more heterogeneous and diverse community.

We know shamefully little about the subtleties of the politics of these sixteen million. But one gross fact rises clear—after fifteen years of civil war and terror, millions of South Vietnamese will never willingly submit to Communist rule—and other millions, substantially fewer, will never willingly submit to government rule. Whoever has the upper hand in a "central" or "coalition" government in Saigon, that government will never be able to assure all the villagers and demobilized veterans that they will be safe in their own cottages and streets, from search, seizure, arrest, imprisonment, or the atavistic revenge of embittered neighbors. Union Blue and Rebel Gray never were expected, after our own civil war, to live quietly, side by side, in the same streets of the same town. Some way must be found to separate South Vietnam into communities where all can be secure, with each community in control of its own safety and police, yet bracketed under a federal government that can cause all to thrive.

Only if the reality of the situation at the grassroots is recognized can there be a glimmer of a long-range solution. And such perspectives should lead us, therefore, to shape our military operations in the field, particularly in this phase of withdrawal, to the given solution: the partition of South Vietnam, under a federal government, into political cantonments or states.

The time for a fresh approach has never been more propitious than now. The sober yet enigmatic diplomacy of Richard Nixon in Asia has, up to now, led us to no commitments of a Johnsonian quality. It still retains its flexibility; and its constant re-examination of field strategy is a virtue. In the field of battle, allied forces momentarily have the upper hand. Pacification apparently proceeds encouragingly, and it is from this strength, rather than from the paralysis of a post-Tet shock, that a more generous and rea-

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nificant work is "The Highroad of Saint James" (the phrase is the Spanish name for the Milky Way). A sixteenth-century Spaniard named Juan, who has abandoned his monastic training in order to see the world as an army drummer, falls ill with the plague in Antwerp, and vows that if he survives he will make a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, reputed site of the tomb of St. James. But upon his return to Spain he succumbs again to earthly desires, and embarks for the New World in search of wealth and glory. He finds only poverty and wretchedness. Back in Spain, where the Inquisition is in full swing, "Juan the West Indian" confronts "Juan the Pilgrim." The alter-

ego Juans—greedy adventurer and religious zealot—again set off for the colonies. "Like the Night" presents an archetypal soldier about to leave for war. In successive episodes that take place in ancient Greece, sixteenth-century Spain, eighteenth-century France, and twentieth-century Britain the author negates the idea of progress and stresses the immutability of human folly.

"Right of Sanctuary" describes the sense of timelessness experienced by an official of an unnamed Latin American country during the long months he spends in asylum in a neighboring nation's embassy after a *coup d'état*. "Journey to the Source" resembles a film run backwards, unveiling layers of memory to disclose the lost innocence of its leading figure. The last tale, "The Chosen," gives an ironic twist to the legend of the Flood.

Carpentier views our present-day circumstances as an end-product of historical forces. His quest for man's true essence, however, leads him to evoke the ever-recurring myths that fuse past, present and future into a unified whole. Because of his verbal flourishes, twisted syntax, and grotesque imagery ("when a carcass was thrown into the middle of the street, black baldheaded vultures would unwind its tripes like ribbons on a maypole"), he has been acclaimed as a master of neo-baroque prose.

For American readers unfamiliar with Carpentier's previously translated books, *War of Time* introduces a mature, imaginative artist, one of the first to universalize in fiction the Latin American experience.

George R. McMurray

George R. McMurray is professor of Latin American literature at Colorado State University.

Vietnam

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sonable approach can be made to the enemy.

At present, for example, we support the Saigon government's grip on all forty-four provincial capitals in South Vietnam. About such provincial capitals fan the hamlets—12,000 to 14,000 of them. In some, the Communists have, indeed, won enduring loyalty. Many more are profoundly anti-Communist, whether or not they are pro-Thieu/Ky. But the political approach and field operations in South Vietnam bear almost no relation to these underlying political realities.

A first step to realistic cantonment and ultimate peace might be for us to *abandon* three or four such provincial capitals and recognize Vietcong control over them. This must be a most delicate operation, for fragmentation in many Vietnamese provinces runs hamlet by neighboring hamlet, and in some cases house by house. Yet it is easier for us to proceed with the separation of communities in South Vietnam now, while we hold the upper hand in battle, than it may be a year hence when the tide of war may have been reversed. Advance notice would have to be given to government loyalists in capitals or towns to be turned over to the Vietcong, so that they might have the option of leaving before Communist police and justice take over. Compensation would have to be paid the dispossessed. Free entry to and egress from all areas, during the transition months, would have to be guaranteed so people would have time to think matters over and make their decisions without risk.

The thinking behind such a move would have to be made publicly clear. The provinces turned over by our side to the Vietcong would be recognized as outright Communist sanctuaries, free from all bombings, all search-and-destroy missions, either by Americans or Saigon forces. Realism would dictate a further declaration: Such enclaves would remain sanctuaries only so long as the Communists did not use them as bases for raiding or molesting adjacent anti-Communist provinces. In which case, it sternly would be made clear that retaliation from the government side would come instantly, with American air and artillery support.

Thus, in some areas of South Vietnam, under American protection, there would be communities in which Communists would be safe, zones of security where Communist officials would retain their posts and Communist leaders would remain leaders. Somewhere Communist partisans and veterans could rebuild their lives without constant fear, could accumulate land or build shelter worth preserving that only their own aggression could endanger again. The essence of the thinking, made clear to friend and foe alike, is that the Communists, too, should have a stake in South Vietnam, hostage to fortune and renewed war.

Such a solution obviously might be unacceptable to the North Vietnamese and to Hanoi's negotiating team in Paris. But it offers the Vietcong, the Communists in the South, and their sympathizers, more than ever has been offered before. It is they and their families who bear the brunt of the air bombings, the raids, the random artillery shellings. No American intelligence agency boasts any real expertise on the rifts and fissions between the Communists, North and South. But the division is historic—and whatever widens it is in our interest. No matter how small the beginning enclaves of sanctuary and cease-fire, we can lose little by experimenting, and can gain, abundantly, if the spread of sanctuaries and cease-fire moves toward a generalized peace.

One cannot blueprint such a partition of South Vietnam from Paris or Washington—such a map would have to develop from tentative beginnings, by local negotiations, open or secret, covering specific village clusters, known roads, visible terrain. Certain areas of South Vietnam—notably parts of the Delta and pockets of the coastal plain—are probably irrevocably Communist in sympathy. But far greater areas of Vietnam and the decisive preponderance of its people are anti-Communist. Between both kinds of provinces, trades might be encouraged over the roads the Americans have built that lead to and from market towns. Indeed such trade already goes on today, although it is clandestine. If the mollifying process goes far enough, one can even envision a tentative resumption of trade between North and South Vietnam, such as now goes on between East and West Germany.

A federal government, aided by America, might begin to make schools, electricity, medical care, and irrigation available to all provinces—while leaving the internal security of each province to its own politics, as Americans leave local police to local authorities. Individuals—farmers, teachers, agitators, veterans, traitors—must be convinced that they will not be at the mercy of the other side's retaliation. And it is here, in morally underwriting and, during the withdrawal period, physically guaranteeing positive mercy, that America can play its most creative role.

No echo of the Paris talks promises what Vietnamese need most—a self-insuring guarantee of person and life. The premise of each side in Paris calls for a unitary state in which is implicit large-scale slaughter—either of anti-Communists by the Cong, or of Communists by government police.

In the several years left on the timetable of our withdrawal, we still have the opportunity to set a new political perspective and explore an initiative never yet attempted. It would not be wrong for us to indicate to the Saigon government that a new federal government, cantoned into provinces of different political hues, is what we envision. Nor would it be impossible to proclaim publicly that to insure a thriving federal Vietnam, our substantial aid would go to all provinces, loyalist and Communist alike, so that healing might come where our arms have spread sorrow.

"Just because you're declining doesn't mean Western civilization is declining."