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TOPIC 17:

CULTURE AND POLITICS IN VIETNAM

By

Mr. George A. Carver, Jr.

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TOPIC 17:

CULTURE AND POLITICS IN VIETNAM

By

Mr. George A. Carver, Jr.

(2 April 1969)

DR. ASHBROOK: (Introduced the speaker).

MR. CARVER: Gentlemen, it is always a pleasure and a privilege to come and talk to this distinguished gathering.

I have been asked by those who run your efficient course to speak for a few minutes this morning on "Culture and Politics in Vietnam." Let me make clear from the outset one or two things that I am not going to do. I do not propose in the course of these remarks to say anything about pacification, counterinsurgency per se, the current state of military operations, or other factors of the situation which are very much on the front pages of your daily newspapers or for those of you who keep up with the traffic, the top of your bulletins, and in-boxes back in your respective offices.

Instead, this morning I think it would be useful if for a few moments we stepped away from the hustle and bustle of current events and took a look at not the situation but what causes the situation to be the type of struggle or type of environment that we in fact find in Vietnam today. No one can have even the most cursory experience with the struggle there going on without realizing how complex it is and how many tangled skeins and threads are interwoven throughout it. But I think it might be useful for a few moments this morning to pause and reflect on some of the more basic factors which will, I think, give us an indication of how truly complex the

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whole situation and struggle is and why certain aspects of it are extremely difficult to come to grips with and why many of our own approaches, even analytic approaches, often produce as much confusion as clarity and why in Western eyes, in a Western context, we can find it very difficult to comprehend.

Therefore, rather than talk in these remarks about the situation per se, I would like to invite your attention for a short while on the root factors which shape it, the factors which in effect constitute what you might call the social and political matrix within which the Vietnam struggle is not only being waged but within which it has been waged for the past two decades.

Right at the outset we have to pause because one of the chief problems in looking at Vietnam is the fact that the very language that we tend to employ or want to employ when talking about a situation like that is the source of more confusion than clarity.

When we talk about politics, either in our offices or in the National War College or in our universities or in writing columns for our newspapers, and things of that nature, we naturally, unavoidably, fall into a language or a universal discourse which we were shaped in in the course of our academic training. We talk about nation-states; we talk about aggression; we talk about self-determination; we talk about elections; we talk about political parties; we employ, in short, a whole vocabulary that is in effect rooted in our own Western political experience; and we use, without

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pausing to reflect very much on their meaning, a large number of terms which in effect are really concept labels for concepts that are historically rooted in our own Western tradition.

The problem when you try to apply this type discourse to Vietnam is that very few of our Western concepts have any one-for-one relationship to the situation as it pertains out there. Our labels are not applicable; hence, the language that we are prone to use tends to produce more distortion than enlightenment. We cannot talk, for example, about the struggle in Vietnam as a struggle between two nation-states. The whole sort of metaphor which is unconscious in our whole discourse of a kind of dispute between two nations, each of which recognizes the other's right to existence, so they have some dispute over their frontier -- a la the U. S. perhaps and Canada -- simply does not apply.

If you want to understand the dynamics of the situation in Vietnam and the root factors in the struggle you have to look elsewhere and you have to pick very carefully among words to select those which do the least to betray you and the most to help you. There are several factors, I think, that we simply have to hoist aborad if we are going to try to make sense out of this complicated struggle.

Perhaps the most important to begin with is the simple fact, easily escaped, that Vietnam is not and never has been a politicized society in our sense or understanding of the term. Nor has Vietnam any political tradition as we in the West understand

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it and know it.

Now, let us be a little bit careful here to be sure we know what we are saying and are not saying more than we mean.

The Vietnamese, as any of you who have spent any time out there are only too well aware, have an acutely, keenly, highly developed sense of pride in themselves as Vietnamese and pride in their own ethnic tradition. They have an acute sense of what you might call "peoplehood" but they have almost no sense of what we would call "nationhood" which is a sense of participation in and identification with a shared common body of political experience. There is, in short, no political institutional cement in Vietnamese society or, for that matter, there is no tradition of single rule or political rule over the entire territory that is now known as Vietnam. This is a fact that is extremely important to grasp, because it colors a great deal of Vietnamese political attitudes and permeates much of Vietnamese political life.

The lack of institutional cement and tradition is also extremely important, although easily overlooked.

Now just stop for a moment and think about what kinds of experiences you have in the United States and realize that they are almost utterly lacking when we talk about the Vietnamese and their own experiences. We grow up unconsciously participating, even from our earliest kindergarten days, in a kind of political process which imbues in us from early childhood the notion of, say, the sanctity of majority rule. I mean, if a kindergarten class in the United

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States is debating whether they go to the Zoo or the Fire House, a not uncommon practice is to take a vote and if twelve of them decide they want to go to the Zoo and eleven decide they want to go to the Fire House everybody accepts that they go to the Zoo. This is the kind of political familiarization that begins almost in the cradle in American life and is utterly foreign and lacking in Vietnam.

We unconsciously accept, although we sometimes debate in our public print, nonetheless few really question the validity of, say, our court system or our court structure, which provides here in the United States what we might call a hierarchy of umpires for settling disputes. As disputes between people, between people and political institutions, between individuals and states, or individuals and corporations go through the court system, if one party or the other does not like what the court of first instance decides it goes to an appellate procedure, eventually it winds up at the Supreme Court. One may not be happy, if one is a participant particularly, with the Supreme Court's decision, but it does not really occur to very many of us to question the Supreme Court's right to decide. Nor does it really occur to very many of us to doubt the fact that the Supreme Court is the final arbiter and, once it has made its ruling, then within the structure of our legal system there is nowhere else to turn, and we just have to accept that ruling as a fait accompli.

Again, this very approach to politics or political life or even commercial life or private life conducted within a framework of

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laws and traditions and institutions presupposes an attitude and a view towards politics which is completely lacking in Vietnam. Similarly, we have a parliamentary or a representative tradition here in the United States which provides a forum through which political balances can be struck and political disagreements can be worked out.

It is accepted as perfectly normal that you have a majority party and a minority party in Congress, that on particular issues and particular bills deals are made; relative political strengths can be tested; the political importance of various constituencies can be voiced to their elected representatives. We have a very intricate system, for, as I say, striking balances, working out deals, testing strengths, seeing who really has the muscle and who does not, and working this all out within a relatively peacefully, sometimes noisily, through an institutional framework rather than through the use of tanks or mobs in the streets. This kind of institutional framework, this kind of institutional experience, this kind of institutional tradition is completely lacking in Vietnam; and Vietnamese political disputes, hence, are carried on by means and through ways quite different from ours.

I do not want to belabor these points, but I do think that we have to appreciate at the outset, as we turn to look at the Vietnamese, how they function politically and why they function politically the way they do, to realize that they have almost none of the things that we take so much for granted here in the United States or, for

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that matter, within the Western tradition generally, that we do not even pause to reflect on their absence; and we are very easily misled at times by bodies which use in foreign countries, particularly in Southeast Asia, the names of institutions we have here in the United States, even though the institutions in those other countries play roles or functions or have an importance radically different from that which we know and enjoy in the experience closest to home for us.

Now, I do not want to take the time here to go into a long disposition on Vietnamese history, but there are one or two factors of Vietnamese history that I think are salient if we want to appreciate how the culture works and how it influences political life in Vietnam.

The first think you have to remember is that, although the Vietnamese, as I said, do have an intense pride in their own ethnic homogeneity -- they are very proud of being Vietnamese; they consider themselves a cut above all foreigners; they have a great sense of identification in their own cultural tradition. Nonetheless, their culture (and do not ever say this to a Vietnamese directly, but it happens to be true) is largely derivative, heavily patterned on Chinese influence.

The Vietnamese, after all, were under ten centuries of direct Chinese rule and almost ten more centuries of more or less effective Chinese influence and suzerainty. This produced in Vietnam a very Sinicized culture which has certain particular aspects or

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ramifications which heavily influence the Vietnamese approach to politics in Vietnamese political life.

Secondly, you have to remember that the life motif of Vietnamese history is the gradual southward expansion of the ethnic Viets who sprang up as a separate identifiable cultural and racial group in the Red River Delta in about the third century B. C. and who gradually moved southward over the course of the ensuing 18th century to occupy that territory which we now know under the label of Vietnam. But recognizing that this is the main stream of life motif, if you will, of Vietnamese history, you also have to appreciate that Vietnamization of the present land of Vietnam, particularly in the southern portions thereof, is actually a relatively recent historical event. The Vietnamese did not begin to get down, for example, into the Mekong Delta until the 17th century, and serious Vietnamese colonization and take-over of the Mekong Delta is a development of the 18th and early 19th centuries.

Most important of all, in determining the Vietnamese attitudes toward politics, is that you have to realize that in all the almost 2,000 years of Vietnamese at least oral tradition for only sixty of these years, the period from 1802 and 1862, has the territory that is now denoted as Vietnam, North and South on our maps, been under a single political rule. That was the very brief period when the Emperor Gia Long (former Nguyen) acceded to power in 1802 by crushing the remnants of the Tay Son revolt until 1862 when he had to cede what was Cochinchina, or the southern part of South

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Vietnam, the three easternmost provinces, to France.

Thus you do not have, despite a strong unified ethnic tradition, a political tradition and you have no tradition of a nation-state whose authority or writ runs over the entire borders of what we now know as Vietnam.

Furthermore, because the Vietnamese evolved historically in the way that I have just described in very summary fashion, they developed, instead of loyalty to some central political authority or some central political tradition, a very strong pattern of regional orientation. This again was a result of a number of factors, not the least of them being excessively barbarous communications during the 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries. And what you got was not a single united people so much as a people with a broad sort of vague, fuzzy, diffuse sense of ethnic brotherhood who developed basically into three regionally oriented subcultures in the Red River Delta in the North and the coastal strip along the coast between the Red River Delta and the Mekong Delta, and in the Mekong Delta in the South -- these three cultural areas being known in the French days and still referred to sometimes as Tongking in the north, Annam in the center, and Cochin-China in the south.

Furthermore, on top of this whole period of Chinese influence, this Chinese patterned, regionally oriented cultural development, there came during the latter part of the 19th and the early 20th centuries a strong French cultural overlay as a result of the French colonial tradition and experience, which again produced some

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rather drastic effects and very marked effects on contemporary and current Vietnamese life.

Now, how does all this put together and how does all this relate even remotely to the sort of problems that we have to deal with, if not here in the National War College, at least the minute we go back to our offices in our various Services and agencies from whence we came?

Well, the way it influences and the way it works out is as follows:

The Vietnamese, in the absence of the kind of political tradition that we have, have developed other sorts of institutions which have ramifications or importance that we would consider as political. The chief of these and the most important and perhaps the linchpin of Vietnamese society is the family or the extended family -- not the family quite in the sense of simply father, mother, and children, but the family in the sense of father, mother, and children under the second and third generations. The cult of the family has very deep roots that go right back to the beginning of Vietnamese civilization. There is a great deal of historical speculation about it. The most persuasive hypothesis I have ever seen, although this is not the sort of thing that is susceptible to proof beyond a reasonable doubt, is that in Vietnam, as in other agricultural societies throughout Southeast Asia and elsewhere in the world, the family cult arose in response to the needs of a rice-growing culture.

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If you stop and think about the cultivation of rice for a moment you will realize that it has a couple of unique peculiarities in that at seed time and harvest you need intensive labor on the part of a great many people, whereas during the rest of the year, when the crops are growing, there is not very much for people to do; they require only casual attention. There are some scholars and some sociologists who believe, and I think they probably have a pretty good case, that the notion of the family or the institution of the family evolved as a response to the need for having sufficient hands around to serve you at harvest time with some institutional mechanism which imposed on the rest of the society the obligation of taking care of the idle personnel during times other than harvest or seed time.

Be that as it may, the family, as the kingpin or the linchpin of Vietnamese life, has 2,000 years of tradition behind it and it is not something that is liable to change overnight or within the next year or within the next decade or indeed within the lifetime of any of us sitting here in this room.

The importance of the family cuts twofold in Vietnamese life. One way it cuts is that it produces a kind of person or a kind of individual who, from the very cradle, looks at life in a way rather different from the way you and I tend to. We are the legates and the heirs, if you will, of the 17th century atomists and scientists who brought us up in a tradition or who shaped our intellectual tradition and caused us to be brought up thinking of

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ourselves primarily as individuals. We have ties; we have loyalties; we have friends; we honor our parents in most cases; we feel some measure of affection for our siblings, brothers, and sisters; we have people that we went through school with, be it West Point, Annapolis, or some civilian institution. None is to say that we are sort of automata, off by ourselves. But stop and think for a moment.

When you reflect on yourself who you are, what you are, where you are going, what you are doing, you tend to think of yourself as a single individual person who is going to make it or not make it on your own and who is going to find your fulfillment and your satisfaction through the exertion of your own individual labors and endeavors. This is perfectly natural and this is perfectly normal, but in a certain sense you have a general tendency to look at yourself or think of yourself as a kind of social atom in a world of other social atoms or other individuals. You band together and when you want to make decisions, at least if you are not in the military service or some hierarchical body, you do it by counting how many atoms want X and how many atoms want Y, and the larger number of atoms makes the decision, and that is perfectly right, perfectly natural, and that is the way life works in a Western society or at least in ours. But that is not the way it works in Vietnam, because a Vietnamese child, from the moment of his conscious awareness, is by and large taught to think of himself not as an individual but as a member of a group -- first and

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foremost, the family group; thus, he finds his fulfillment; he finds his self-identity; he finds his meaning in life, if you will, not through his own individual exertions or efforts but through the cooperative endeavor with other members of groups with which he identifies. And if you cut him off totally from the group -- for instance, send him to the United States for training, if he is not properly oriented or culturally developed to the point where he can profit from it -- he is a very lost fish out of water indeed.

All this may sound like misty and rather irrelevant theorizing matters of hazy social jargon, but I can assure you that it is not, because this orientation towards the family first and foremost, for example, has a profound influence on certain things that we consider very politically important, far from the least of which is this matter of corruption.

Just stop and think how this works for a second. In the United States, or, for that matter, in Western societies generally, if you catch an individual with a hand in the till (and Lord knows this is not unknown in the United States) at least he thinks he ought to feel guilty or at least most other people think he ought to feel guilty. He thinks he ought to feel guilty and most of us would feel that he ought to feel guilty. If, instead of having his own hand directly in the till, he abused a position of profit or trust to give favored treatment to jobs, import licenses, positions, promotions to his brother, to his nephew, to his cousin, to his son-in-law, to his wife's aunt, etc., etc., etc., again none of this is unknown in

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the United States -- I mean, Boston, New York, and many other places, or even Washington, D. C. this sort of nepotism and family favoritism is certainly not a Vietnamese invention -- but it is something in the United States that we would just as soon not have put in public print, that we would rather not get caught doing; and when someone is caught doing it those of us who are on the outside and witnessing being caught feel that he ought properly to be punished.

You see, in Vietnam -- oversimplifying somewhat but not much -- it works almost exactly the other way around. Because of the way one is brought up in the Vietnamese tradition in the Vietnamese society, if you have a position where you can do something for somebody -- let us say, grant promotions in the army; let us say, appoint people to provincial office; let us say, give people import licenses or withhold import licenses -- and you do not take care of your brother, your nephew, your son-in-law, your niece's husband, then it is you who are not committing a crime but committing a moral sin in running counter to the grains and the mores of the society, because your first and primary obligation as a true Vietnamese is the obligation derived from your membership in the family, all of whose members are supposed to take care of each other. Thus, if you are in a position to do something to advance the family or members thereof and, instead of giving them the preferment which the tradition of society rightly insists that you should do, according to their traditions, you go and do a favor for an outsider who has no claims on you and who is not a member of the clan, then you had done something

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which in strict Vietnamese tradition is morally wrong.

I have oversimplified and overschematized the case somewhat, but this lies behind a lot of Vietnamese thinking and it influences a lot of Vietnamese practice that we would be inclined to dismiss or to write off as corrupt. This is not to say that there is not genuine corruption in Vietnam. This is not to say that such corruption that exists is something that should be done about. To explain something is not necessarily to excuse it, but I cite this as an example of how Vietnamese political traditions and cultural traditions can produce political behavior of a kind that we often find difficult to comprehend; yet, to a Vietnamese it is perfectly rational and perfectly understandable.

A second thing that you need to remember is that this local orientation of Vietnamese society, which is a function of history and which is a function of a wide variety of factors, has produced only the most tenuous kind of affection for any national government and, instead, has induced people to identify themselves most closely, if not with their families, with those in the village from whence they came and has tended to make local ties and local loyalties more important than any sort of vague claims of some abstract concept, such as the national state. Your first and foremost obligation is to your family. The second class of people to whom you are most likely to turn and with which you are most likely to feel comfortable are those from your own village, or, if not from your own village, from your own province. This again is a

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cultural and social outlook and has a profound influence on Vietnamese behavior in more obviously political fields, such as, for example, picking personnel for jobs or preferment or appointment in either the military or the civil service.

There is another aspect of Vietnamese society which again it is almost essential that we bring ourselves up short and think about because it is something that we have gone a long way from over the course of the past 200 years.

The traditionally Vietnamese society is a highly stratified society, and this is thought to be right and proper. You had the king or the emperor; you had the court nobles; you had the various services or degrees of services in the mandarinates; you had the village with the village council of notables; you had the well-to-do farmers; you had the poor farmers; and you had along the Chinese fashion a sort of ascending hierarchy running from the peasant up through toward the king or to the emperor.

Now, Vietnam, in its traditional approach to politics, has a very (what you might call) 17th century flavor about it which in many ways is quite foreign to the sort of 20th century approach that we are accustomed to, brought up in, and handle or think in without reflecting upon here in the United States. We consider it, for example, wrong to have the notion that a man is consigned by birth to a particular role in society and that there is something vaguely immoral or improper or that the universe is somehow slightly out of kilter if he transcends that role to which he was assigned by

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birth, and performs some other function, rising in the social world or, in some cases, declining. This is not an approach that we find congenial at all; but it is an approach that is, again, deeply rooted in 2,000 years of Vietnamese history.

There is in the Vietnamese tradition the idea that a person has a station in life -- an idea that we used to have, as I say, 200 years ago and have come a long way from -- that this is the station into which he is born, that that is the way life is, that is the way the universe is, that is the way the great chain of being runs, that there are certain classes of people destined to till the soil, there are certain classes of people who by right own land, there are certain classes of people who by right hold government offices, there are certain classes of people who by right hold commissions in the army, and that if you get this thing too much out of kilter you are getting the whole universe out of kilter and this is bad, and this is something which the Vietnamese instinctively tend to resist.

There is a peculiarity of the old traditional Sinicized culture with its fairly rigid stratification which also has a profound impact on current Vietnamese behavior and practice. The path in the Chinese tradition to upward mobility was through education, and education of a very highly specialized form. Literary skill and expertise in manipulating the Chinese classics was the skill which enabled you to go sit for the examinations which enabled you, even though a poor farm boy, to become a mandarin and jump five or

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six notches in the social ladder; hence, benefit your children by having them become the children of a mandarin rather than the children of a peasant. This was the same way in the Vietnamese tradition, because the classical Vietnamese educational system was almost exactly patterned from the Chinese system. The examinations for the Vietnamese mandarinal civil service were the almost exact replicas of those used in China during the 15th, 16th, and 17th centuries.

This notion of stratification, this notion of advancement through a certain specialized, rather stylized socially conditioned education, was very much reinforced by the French colonial experience, because, after all, the French are great believers in education of a very literary kind as an avenue to advancement in French life. The doors are largely closed in France unless you can overcome the hurdle of the baccalaureate. This was a French penchant or a French tradition which grafted right onto a root Vietnamese way of looking at things. Although the mandarinal civil service examinations were abolished in 1911, the French set up a series of schools and lycées in Vietnam, and it was a very easy shift for the upper-class Vietnamese mind to change gears from the idea that the path to advancement led through the mandarinal exams to the idea that the path to advancement led through the lycée, that all doors to higher positions or that all roads to higher positions should require first going through the door of the first and second parts of your baccalaureate. This is a view that is still very much

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prevalent in South Vietnam.

Again, is this just area social theory? Does this have anything to do with the price of eggs? Does this have the remotest relationship to the war that we are fighting at the present time? Or any significant aspect thereof?

Yes, gentlemen, it does, because one of the problems that has beset us the most over the past decade or so in Vietnam is this great problem of first-echelon leadership in the South Vietnamese Army -- finding the right kind of platoon leaders, senior squad leaders, but particularly platoon leaders, company commanders, assistant company commanders, etc.

Well, our adversaries have faced the same problem. How have they solved it? They have solved it by promoting to such positions in many cases very simple peasant youths, whom they enlist on their side and for whom they provide avenues of advancement -- in fact, these very avenues of advancement in many cases are one of the strongest inducements that the V. C. recruiters have to offer.

Why are not these avenues open or why have not they traditionally been open on the G.V.N. side? Well, you get right back to this social thing that I was talking about. It is very difficult for the aristocratic Vietnamese to hoist aboard the idea that commission service in the military is not the proper monopoly of one's stratified segment of society to which he belongs or to hoist aboard the idea that you should not have a so-called

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"educational" qualification (in this case a baccalaureate), which is in effect a social qualification.

When we go and talk, as many of your colleagues in the military service do go and talk constantly, and with increasing detail and attention in the last few months, to their Vietnamese friends about opening up the avenues for commissions, more promotions from the ranks, less insistence on the requirement of a baccalaureate, what they do not really realize is that they are bucking 2,000 years of history and they do not really realize why they are bucking 2,000 years of history; and they do not sometimes realize that the foot-dragging on the part of the Vietnamese is not because of any debate over the relative educational merits of baccalaureate training as opposed to field experience, but because they are running up against the very root social attitude that is so radically different from ours that we find it very hard to appreciate that it exists, let alone appreciate its full importance.

Again, I do not want to go into too much detail or go too far afield, but there are one or two other factors of traditional Vietnamese life which also influenced their outlook on politics and the way the political system works.

We talked about the family loyalty; we talked about the notion of stratification in society. I think you have to also recognize that one of the principal political legacies of the French colonial experience is that Vietnamese politics tends to be very much the politics of conspiracy. The Vietnamese political structure,

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or at least Vietnamese political parties that exist today, almost all grew up during the French colonial era as clandestine, covert, nationalist parties who had as their aim and object the overthrow of the French regime. If they were going to survive at all against the administrations of the French sûreté and the French police they had to become conspiratorial and they had to become adept in clandestine operations; and they had to devote most of their attention towards testing the loyalty of their adherents and working only within a closed tight circle and fearing for their very lives from sûreté agents or agent provocateur or betrayal by their rivals within the Vietnamese political spectrum.

Here again, this is a subject on which we could talk for great length and which I assure you I will not this morning.

What this has produced is a kind of approach and attitude towards politics by those Vietnamese, particularly the civilians, who are active in political life, particularly those of the generation of their late 30s, 40s, and early 50s, to whom one would think the society could look for political leadership, yet who were by temperament and training and background unfitted to provide that leadership because their whole political experience has been an experience in the techniques of revolutionary overthrow and not in the techniques of constructive advocacy and that the general instinctive Vietnamese way of thinking about political life is not that of cooperation or balance, striking any sort of overt review, but of forming a clandestine covert party keyed to a point of doctrine

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which is very prone to break up into splinter actions of other clandestine parties simply because that is the way you had to stay alive and that is the way you had to compete and that is the kind of models that were developed and the kind of experience that was set during the period of French rule, which set a tone to the climate of Vietnamese political life that still exists today.

Then you have various other factors that you have to consider which I will not take the time to dwell on in any great detail. But in the absence of political institutions, to which people can attach their loyalties and which can influence political life as we know it, religion has often formed a surrogate symbol for politics. This is one of the reasons why you find in Vietnamese life people tending to cluster about religious labels, be they Catholic, be they Buddhist, be they Hoa Hoa, be they Cao Dai, be they whatever, when actually there is no issue of religious doctrine involved but where in the absence of political labels religious labels have always had a great deal of appeal. Hence, you find that political wars for preference, for position, for influence are often being waged or carried on, or struggles at least are being carried on under religious guises.

This is the sort of thing we have going on today when the opposition of Quang to the Thieu government is being carried on under the banner of Buddhism, or at least of one factor of the Buddhist church, when there is absolutely no doctrinal issue at all involved but where, because of the accidents

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of Vietnamese history, the religious organization that surrounds the Anquang Pagoda happens to be one of the most effective political vehicles in contemporary Vietnamese life.

We could go on at great length in illuminating further examples, but I will not take the time to do it. Suffice it to say, we have to realize that because we do not have in this country a political tradition as we understand it political life has taken on a form quite different from that to which we are used. We have a value structure and a value system and a mode of looking at things and a way of behaving with respect to your fellow and to your neighbor which produces a kind of political experience and a kind of political outlook that is so different in many respects from ours that the very language of politics that we use produces more distortion than clarity when we are prone to talk about the Vietnamese situation.

It is against this backdrop that the current struggle in Vietnam is being waged and that the struggle has been waged in the past decade-and-a-half. The struggle that is going on is not a struggle between two countries or nation-states as we understand them, despite the fact that both sides use the names of North Vietnam and South Vietnam. But basically it is a struggle between two sets of Vietnamese protagonists, each of whom goes about politics and political life in its own way.

These protagonists can be briefly and I think not inaccurately explained as on the one hand the Communist Party and its adherents

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and clients and on the other hand those who are opposed to communist rule. That may sound like the grossest kind of oversimplification; and in stating the situation that baldly in that way may make me sound like I am an unrepentent cold warrior or an unreconstructed McCarthyite, or whatever you want to say. Let me assure you that that is really not as much an oversimplification as it may sound, and if you approach Vietnamese politics in this vein you are going to find that a lot of the chinks fall into place.

What you have to recognize is that on one side of the struggle you have a reasonably cohesive system but that this cohesion was imposed by the Vietnamese Communist Party through the exploitation of doctrine, discipline, organization, and a fanatic degree of ruthlessness. All these divisive trends in political traditions that I have described exist in North Vietnam as well as in South Vietnam, but they have been to a certain degree surmounted in North Vietnam by the activities of the Communist Party, which has been willing to pay a social price that we on the U. S. side and those Vietnamese in South Vietnam who work with us would, I think, quite properly regard it as socially unacceptable. The price that had to be paid, for example, was the price of being willing to deliberately eradicate and destroy five percent of your population for doctrinal reasons -- which is what happened in North Vietnam during 1954 through 1956 during the so-called land rent reductions and land reform campaigns.

You do have in the Vietnamese Communist Party and its adherents a sort of closed system with a tight degree of organization

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headed by an identifiable group of eleven people chaired by a remarkable man who now calls himself Ho Chi Minh. Because of their discipline, because of their skill in the use of front organizations, the Party has been able to achieve a position of pre-eminence in North Vietnam and has been able to build and structure an extremely important and powerful organization in the South which it keeps under tight and complete effective control, even though, of course, there are many who are fighting on the V. C. side in South Vietnam who never heard of Marx or Lenin and who are not fighting for any reason of communist doctrine, who are not members of the Party, and who were induced to serve in the ranks for a variety of personal or other reasons, some of them in some cases very noble indeed. But the fact that there are many noncommunists in the ranks does not and should not be allowed to becloud the other fact, which is of equal importance, that the total movement, which is striving for political control over Vietnam, is and always has been under the tight and effective control of the Vietnamese Communist Party and is operated in every echelon in its important military and political aspects through Party command channels.

The great problem or difficulty with the struggle in Vietnam is: Whereas on the one side one set of protagonists is fairly clearly defined and fairly easy to identify, on the other side the other set of protagonists is not, because the other set of protagonists can perhaps only be accurately generically labelled as consisting of all those who are opposed to the concept of communist

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rule. In fact, that is the only thing on which many of them are unified at all, because opposition to the notion of communist rule does not, unfortunately, and never has, translate necessarily into positive support for any particular governmental institution or any particular set of noncommunist leaders.

This diffuse group that runs from almost the extreme Left over to the very extreme Right in the aggregate probably comprises the majority of the politicized Vietnamese in South Vietnam at least. If this were not the case, the war would have been ended years ago in an inevitable communist victory. I might also say that this group of the communists and their clients who are driving for power and those who are opposed to communist rule and are working more or less effectively with American support to try to prevent it, does not necessarily exhaust the entire population of Vietnam. There is, of course, a third group of indeterminate size, primarily located in the countryside, which really has no great loyalties one way or the other and wants above all to be left alone.

But the prosecution of the struggle is being carried on, as I say, by on the one hand the Party and its clients and followers and on the other side this much more diffuse unstructured group who are seldom united on anything but the fact that whatever else they may or may not want they do not want to live under a communist regime or under a communist state -- many of them, people on this side of the spectrum, having had only too much first-hand experience or family experience with what life under communist rule can in effect

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be like.

The balance or the race, if you will, in Vietnam, putting aside the military factor for the moment, putting aside other factors, such as foreign involvement, and stripping this thing down to its essentials, has always been this:

Is the Communist Party so well-organized that it will inevitably come to power because of the lack of organization and lack of unity and lack of cohesion among its opponents, who suffer from these divisive and, politically in some ways, debilitating social and historically rooted trends that I have outlined? Is the Party so well-organized that its acquisition of power is inevitable? Or can the group who is opposed to communist rule have the time to develop and to build and to shape down a structural or institutional matrix sufficiently keyed to the realities of Vietnamese political life so that it has some genuine viability and life of its own and can be developed to the point where it is capable of coping with the internal challenge of the highly disciplined and highly organized Communist Party?

This has been the real political struggle that has been going on since 1956 when this insurgency first developed. Unfortunately, and for the cause of noncommunist Vietnam, the development or evolution of Vietnamese political life got off to a promising start which proved to be a blind alley, because, although Diem accomplished many things in his early years -- he crested his high-water mark in 1957 and after that was in the longer term sense more

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of a brake on political development in noncommunist Vietnam than a prod or assist thereto -- after Diem's inevitable overthrow -- and I personally believe that by 1963 it was inevitable -- you had the period where you had to go back three or four years and pick up from about 1957 and go through a shake-out process to try to find where the real political lines of force were in Vietnam and begin once again to develop an institutional structure capable of knitting together the country which had never been a country in 2,000 years and which, as I said earlier in my remarks, had no tradition of political society and no institutional cement to support it.

Now, a great deal of progress has been made since 1963 and particularly in 1965 towards developing an institutional counter with some sort of governmental effectiveness. We still have not seen the answer to the question I have just posed and you still have at the root of the struggle a contest as to who is going to provide the answer for the politicized life of Vietnam in the second half of the 20th century. Will it be the Communist Party operating off of doctrinal fanaticism and superior organization? Or can those who are opposed to communist rule build and develop the institutional response necessary before they are overwhelmed?

That really is what the political struggle in Vietnam is and always has been about. That is the race that is currently going on. And I think the only fair way that you can categorize the race at the moment is to say that the outcome simply has not been decided.

So, in my own personal view the acid test is coming during

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the next ten to twelve calendar months. If I were to be invited back to The National War College next year to give this same lecture I think I would have to speak after drawing a balance sheet to tell you why the race came out one way or the other. At the moment I cannot.

There is the race; there is the struggle; there is what the political debate in Vietnam at heart is all about. The issue has not been closed, but I think it probably will be decided during the course of this year; that is why this year is one of the most interesting of all years for one to be privileged to work on Vietnamese affairs.

Thank you very much.

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