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VIETNAM: WHERE WE ARE AND HOW WE GOT THERE

I

Few topics generate as much current interest, debate or emotional heat as the struggle now being waged in Vietnam. This struggle is a complex one with deep historical roots. Because of the complexity of the issues involved, certitude of conviction among those who debate them often runs in roughly inverse proportion to the debater's factual knowledge. One simply cannot meaningfully or usefully discuss the present situation in Vietnam without some understanding and appreciation of the Vietnamese people's complicated and troubled past. Before I turn to the present or glance at the future, therefore, let me quickly review certain essential elements of the historical setting which condition Vietnam's present and will play a major role in shaping its future.

Far from the least of the reasons why the struggle in Vietnam is so imperfectly understood in the United States is that the very language we naturally, and unthinkingly, employ in discussing this struggle bears little relationship to the facts of the case. When we in the West talk about politics or wars or international affairs, we instinctively utilize words like "nation" and "state," "boundary" and "government," "aggression" and "Self-determination." In short, we instinctively employ the political vocabulary with which we are familiar, using words and concepts comfortably meaningful

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within the context of our own political traditions and experience. The Vietnamese, however, have a history and are shaped by traditions radically different from ours. Hence our political vocabulary and our political concepts have little meaningful relevance to the realities of their situation.

Though the Vietnamese have over two thousand years of recorded history as an identifiably separate people and a fierce sense of ethnic pride in their twenty plus centuries of ethnic traditions, they do not constitute -- at least in South Vietnam -- a politicized society as we understand that term. The Vietnamese have no tradition of political unity, nor do their current political arrangements or institutions have any supporting historical or traditional roots. One has to go back to the sixteenth century before one can find any unbroken threads of political union among the Vietnamese people. Despite this proud people's two millenia of recorded history, the territory that comprises modern Vietnam -- North and South -- did not come under single Vietnamese rule until 1802, and that unified Vietnamese rule only lasted for sixty years. Furthermore, nearly a century of French colonial domination effectively destroyed the binding force of virtually all past political traditions without developing any successor traditions or unifying institutions enjoying wide-spread affection, identification or traditionally-rooted support.

II
Given this historical background, it was virtually inevitable that the end of French rule in Vietnam would be followed by a period of political turmoil. The particular form this turmoil has taken over the past fifteen

touched on above; for the struggle now actually being waged in Vietnam is rooted in the political ambitions of the Vietnamese Communist Party -- known as the Lao Dong -- and, above all, in the ambitions of the man who founded that Party (in 1930) and has always controlled it throughout the remainder of its, and his, lifetime: a seventy nine year old man who ever since 1944 has called himself Ho Chi Minh.

"Uncle Ho," one of the 20th century's most remarkable political figures, has been a professional Communist revolutionary for almost fifty years. The son of a minor Mandarin, he left Vietnam in 1911 (at the age of 21) as a galley boy on a French merchant vessel. After world travels and various odd jobs (including that of Escoffier's protégé and pastry cook in the kitchen of London's Carleton Hotel), he wound up in Paris where he earned a meager living as a photographic retoucher and devoted an ever increasing amount of time to political activity. A fiery left-wing pamphleteer, ^{he} ~~who~~ adopted the name Nguyen Ai Quoc ("Nguyen the Patriot"), ~~he~~ became a member of the French Socialist Party and, in 1920, a Founding Charter Member of the French Communist Party. He went to Moscow for training and indoctrination not long thereafter and embarked on his lifelong vocation as a Communist "apparatchnik." He turned up in Canton in 1925 as Borodin's interpreter and for the next two decades was in charge of the Comintern's organizational activity throughout southeast Asia. It was while acting in this capacity that Ho did the recruiting and organizational work that paved the way for his formal creation of the Vietnamese Communist Party in January 1930;

The style and methods employed by Ho during these early organizational years are illustrative and important, particularly since they set a pattern Ho's subordinates and associates have consistently followed ever since: Ho and his Communist followers have long labored for an independent Vietnam, but only for a Vietnam under complete Communist control. Though they have always tried to sail under the flag of ardent nationalism, in point of fact the Vietnamese Communists have always waged savage, no-quarter warfare against all Vietnamese nationalists unwilling to accept Communist domination.

One of the patron saints of modern Vietnamese nationalism was a scholar and ardent patriot named Phan Boi Chau, who during the two decades between 1905 and 1925 created the first meaningful anti-French nationalist movement. By the time Ho came on the scene, Chau was a legendary figure among the Vietnamese. Ho wanted to exploit Chau's name, but disliked his independence. Ho therefore arranged a rendezvous with Chau in Shanghai to discuss their differences. Ho failed to make the meeting, but Chau went trustingly to the appointed address (selected by Ho) ignorant of the fact that the site was just inside the French concession. The tipped-off French police were waiting and Chau spent the rest of his life in French prisons. Ho thus disposed of a rival whose name he continued to exploit and pocketed the French reward of 100,000 piasters which was usefully employed in funding Ho's Communist organization. Ho and his burgeoning band of Communist followers repeatedly employed essentially the same gambit in dealing with lesser nationalist figures during the late

twenties. Young Vietnamese nationalists were recruited into the revolutionary cause in Vietnam and sent to China for training. Those willing to join the Communists were sent back to Vietnam to recruit new adherents. Those unwilling to accept Communist discipline were also sent back, but these recalcitrants found the French police waiting at the gangplank or frontier with copies of their photographs and dossiers. This technique performed the double function of eliminating the Communists' potential rivals in the nationalist movement and, through the rewards collected from the French Surete, providing the Party with a steady source of revenue.

III

Tactics such as those outlined above have always been (and remain today) standard operating procedure for the Vietnamese Communists in their dealings with fellow Vietnamese reluctant to accept Communist domination -- a fact well known to non-Communist Vietnamese nationalists and far from the least of the reasons why struggles or even dealings between Communist and non-Communist Vietnamese have always been marked by ruthlessness, bitterness and reciprocal distrust.

During World War II, Nguyen Ai Quoc, the Comintern revolutionary, became Ho Chi Minh, the Vietnamese patriot, and with a considerable assist from a Chinese Nationalist General, obtained control over a Chinese-sponsored Vietnamese political movement known as the Viet Minh.

In the chaotic aftermath of Japan's sudden surrender, Ho's Communist-controlled Viet Minh seized power in Hanoi and proclaimed itself the ruler of the "Democratic Republic of Vietnam." This claim was contested by the returning French, with whom Ho negotiated and stalled for just over a year while he readied his followers for war.

Not the least of the preparations Ho and his Communist associates felt it necessary to complete was the imposition of total -- though covert -- Communist control over the ostensibly nationalist Viet Minh movement. The usual tactics of betrayal were employed and armed Viet Minh units launched savage attacks, sometimes in cooperative alliance with French troops, on nationalist guerrillas who would not accept Communist domination. This was a tricky period; for although Ho was trying to tighten Communist control over the nationalist movement, he was also simultaneously trying to push the "national front" line as hard as possible, and to project the image of the Viet Minh/DRV as a broadly-based union of all nationalist elements. Ho's talents, however, proved equal to the task, and his tactics were ingenious. When Ho went to France in May 1946 to negotiate in Paris, he asked the elderly, non-Communist Interior Minister to serve as Chief of State, and named Vo Nguyen Giap as "acting" Interior Minister. As soon as Ho departed, Giap launched a ruthless purge of the DRV Government and National Assembly. During Giap's reign of

terror, about 2,500 non-Communist political figures were murdered. When Ho returned, he publicly wept in sorrow at Giap's hot headed excesses; but by then the physical liquidation of their potential leaders had eliminated the threat of non-Communist nationalist competition for political control within the Viet Minh.

IV

The war for which Ho had been preparing broke out on 19 December 1946. It lasted for seven and a half years and, as you all know, ended in a Viet Minh victory solemnized at the Geneva Conference of 1954. One of its results was the creation of a Communist state ruling that portion of Vietnam that lies north of the 17th Parallel. Another, was the struggle being waged in South Vietnam today.

Communist successes in China in 1949 and 1950 gave Ho a common frontier with a Communist ally and diminished his need for broad support in Vietnam. The Communist Party -- which had been officially "dissolved" in 1945 in support of the popular front image -- re-surfaced in March 1951 under its present name of the Dang Lao Dong (Workers Party). About two years later, Ho's party began a systematic purge of Vietnamese society that made Giap's 1945 ~~purge~~ pogrom look like child's play. This purge -- called "Land Rent Reduction and Land Reform" -- lasted from 1953 to 1956 and was directed by one of Ho's most fanatic disciples, a Politburo member

who uses the name Truong Chinh and was then the Party's First Secretary, under Chairman Ho. This purge involved the deliberate murder of between 80,000 and 100,000 Vietnamese for purely doctrinal reasons. It stimulated a spontaneous peasant revolt in Ho's own home province (Nghe An), ruthlessly crushed by the Viet Minh "Peoples Army" at about the same time that Russian troops were snuffing out the 1956 Hungarian rising. This purge also helped stimulate the mass exodus from North Vietnam of almost a million Vietnamese, who used the opportunity afforded by the regroupment provisions of the 1954 Geneva Accords to vote with their feet and flee Ho's Communist rule to live in ~~xxxx~~ non-Communist South Vietnam.

The Franco-Viet Minh war was a period of particular anguish for non-Communist Vietnamese nationalists. With the energetic assistance of Communist propaganda outlets throughout the world, the Vietnamese Communist Party assiduously propagated the myth that all real Vietnamese patriots rallied to the cause and ranks of the Viet Minh. This claim has gained general credence outside of Vietnam, but it has little foundation in truth. The fact of Communist control over the Viet Minh was well known to most politically aware Vietnamese as early as 1946 and inescapable by 1951. This fact forced non-Communist nationalists to make unpleasant choices among unpalatable alternatives. In individual cases, the choice

made generally hinged on whether the chooser viewed the Communists or the French as the lesser short run evil. Many nationalists refused to choose, so many in fact that the widespread posture of fence-sitting acquired a standard and common name: "attentisme." Some nationalists went more or less reluctantly into the ranks of the Viet Minh. Others, equally patriotic and equally dedicated to the ideal of a free Vietnam, fought with the French against what they regarded as the greater immediate threat to the kind of Vietnam in which they wished to live. Many of South Vietnam's present military and civil leaders followed this latter course, but the fact that they did does not make them any less patriotic or any less nationalistic than their brothers, friends or cousins who followed a different road.

V

The Franco-Viet Minh war ended in a Communist victory, but in the eyes of Ho and his ten colleagues on the Party Politburo, it was an unsatisfactory, partial victory -- half a loaf, rather than total success. For a variety of reasons, including Soviet pressure, the Party accepted what it regarded as a temporary or interim settlement that initially gave the Party undisputed control over only half of the country. This settlement,

negotiated at Geneva during the summer of 1954, did however provide for an almost total withdrawal of the French presence. Furthermore, in a vague, ambiguously worded (and unsigned) "Final Declaration," the 1954 Geneva settlement provisions did state that the 17th Parallel military demarcation line was not to be interpreted as a political or territorial boundary and that some unspecified form of "general elections" were to be held in July 1956.

In accepting the 1954 Geneva settlement, Ho and his Communist colleagues were gambling, but at the time it appeared to them -- and the rest of the world -- that they were gambling on an almost sure thing. Partition at the 17th Parallel put the majority of the Vietnamese population in the northern -- or Communist -- zone. The Communists had every reason to anticipate that with two years in which to organize the population consigned to their control, they could deliver 99+ percent of the majority vote in any mid-1966 electoral contest -- hence they were certain to win, no matter how the southern minority might vote. Furthermore, the Party Politburo had every reason to believe -- in 1954 -- that this anticipated electoral contest was but one of the Party's easy avenues to power in a reasonably short time span of not more than two years. At the time of Geneva, the non-Communist southern zone was tottering on the brink of anarchy and collapse into political chaos. Every logical analysis and calculation indicated that Bao Dai's government -- with its new Premier Ngo Dinh Diem -- would soon unravel, creating a situation where the Communists

would be the only effective, organized political group and, hence, could easily take power almost by default.

Given all the factors then involved, including the considerations just outlined, the Vietnamese Communist Party opted to gamble and acquiesced in the Geneva settlement. Ho and his Politburo colleagues reluctantly accepted less than total victory, but they did so in the confident estimate that the full fruition of their ambitions was being deferred for only two years, at most, and hence the gamble involved was almost riskless, particularly since the settlement adopted would at least guarantee the early elimination of the French Military presence in Vietnam.

VII

The Geneva Accords uniformly (if not always clearly) spoke of Vietnam as a single political entity. The 1954 conference was actually attended, however by representatives of two nascent Vietnamese states, both of which were left at least temporarily in being by the 1954 settlement provisions. One of these was the Communist-controlled "Democratic Republic of Vietnam," whose seat of government was located in Hanoi with Communist Party Chairman Ho serving as Chief of State. The other was French-dominated Vietnam, an "Associated State" within the French Union, whose capital was located in Saigon and whose Chief of State was the puppet Emperor Bao Dai. Though the de facto jurisdiction of each of

these two rival governments was soon limited to one of the two "regroupment zones" -- i. e. to what we now call, respectively, North and South Vietnam -- both claimed theoretical jurisdiction over the entire country. The present Saigon Government no longer even pretends to think in such terms, but the concept of total rule over all of Vietnam is still very much alive in Hanoi and exerts a strong influence over the current thinking and policies of Ho's regime.

The actual course of events in South Vietnam in the months and years following the 1954 Accords confounded all the prophets, including those who sat in the Communist Party Politburo in Hanoi. The catalytic agent of change was Ngo Dinh Diem, whom Bao Dai appointed as his Premier while the Geneva Conference was in session, primarily to defuse non-Communist nationalist opposition to the impending Geneva settlement. Diem came into office with unchallengeable credentials as a Vietnamese patriot. He was an unknown quantity as a national political leader, but no one could credibly charge him with being a French puppet. Those who selected Diem to preside over the final collapse of organized Vietnamese opposition to Communist rule, however, seriously misestimated their chosen patsy. Instead, as you know, Diem deposed Bao Dai, threw off (and out) all remnants of French political control over South Vietnam, dissolved his government's tie with the French Union, and created a still legally existent Republic of Vietnam -- recognized in international law by other countries -- that was as genuinely

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and validly independent as Ho's rival regime in Hanoi.

Whatever be one's judgments on the complex tragedy played out during Diem's final years in power, it is almost impossible to avoid describing the achievements of his early years in office as something bordering on the miraculous. In these early years, Diem provided the leadership that reversed trends which had seemed inevitably irreversible at the time of Geneva. South Vietnam did not collapse into anarchy and chaos. Instead, it survived and developed as a functioning political entity and began to record genuine progress in many political, economic and social fields. I do not mean to suggest for a minute that South Vietnam ever resembled (or is ever likely to resemble) a Jeffersonian utopia. Diem was a fallible human with a mystical conviction in the rightness of his judgment that became progressively more pronounced -- and politically damaging -- as the years wore on. Even in its 1957-1958 heyday, Diem's government had obvious flaws easy to catalogue. Its operations were often clumsy and sometimes prompted legitimate grievances among various segments of the South Vietnamese population. After we acknowledge all of Diem's personal shortcomings and political errors, however, and all the weaknesses of his fledgling government -- unbuttressed and unsupported by any indigenous Vietnamese political experience or traditions -- the fact remains that during his early years it became progressively clearer that Diem's government was steadily gaining in strength ~~at that~~ and that Diem was laying the foundations of a viable, independent non-Communist state.

The achievements of the Diem government's initial years brought into sharp focus the ambiguities latent in key provisions of the 1954 Geneva Accords and the major political problems which the Geneva Conference had swept under the rug. It is clear in retrospect that most of the participants in that conference were convinced that Ho Chi Minh's early acquisition of complete political control over all of Vietnam was a virtually foreordained conclusion and, hence, there was little point in delaying the cessation of hostilities to settle details unlikely to have any practical relevance to the actual course of events in Vietnam. President Eisenhower himself believed, and publicly stated, that Ho could defeat Bao Dai, even in a free election. This view of President Eisenhower's is often cited today in current Vietnam debates, though our late President is generally misquoted as having said something quite different -- and something he never did say -- namely that Ho was sure to win any free election.

The thesis that Ho would have easily won a 1954 electoral contest with Bao Dai is eminently plausible. Whether Ho could have won a truly free electoral contest with Diem in 1956 is a much more debatable proposition. Diem, however, was well aware that a truly free election was effectively precluded by the facts of life in Vietnam, particularly with a tri-partite international supervisory commission hamstrung by a unanimity requirement which ~~gave~~ gave that commission's Polish Communist member an effective veto. Applying the same analysis that had led Ho and his Politburo

colleagues to accept the Geneva settlement (whose election provisions Diem's government had explicitly refused to accept at the time of the conference), Diem knew that in any election, Ho's party would record at least 99+ percent of a majority vote. To participate in this type of electoral contest would be to commit political suicide, something Diem was adamantly unwilling to do.

VIII

In the summer of 1956, Ho and his Politburo had to review their bidding. Diem's success in ~~ign~~ ignoring the Geneva election deadline almost certainly provided the occasion for this bidding review. What worried Hanoi, however, was not Diem's act in itself, but the political strength and progress of the Saigon Government this act unarguably symbolized. Ho and his Party colleagues had to acknowledge, at least to themselves, that Diem's government was not likely to collapse, that its prospects were bright, and that the more it gained in strength, the longer the Party would have to defer attainment of the ~~Part~~ Party's prime objective of acquiring ~~political~~ political control over all of Vietnam. What Ho and his colleagues had to recognize, in short, was they had lost the seemingly riskless gamble they took in accepting the 1954 settlement. Once this fact was recognized, the Party began making preparations to resume armed struggle.

Among the most important of these initial preparations was the creation (in 1956) of an office appended to the Party's Central Committee called the

"Central Reunification Department," which was put in charge of a Major General. I was about to say a "North Vietnamese Major General," but let me here digress a moment to give you a concrete ~~kk~~ illustration of my earlier general comment that the very language we instinctively use in talking about the Vietnam struggle often confuses the issues involved. We frequently talk about "North Vietnam" and "South Vietnam" in a way that imputes a geographic orientation and outlook to the participants ~~x~~ in the struggle which many of the key participants explicitly reject. Nguyen Van Vinh, the general who was selected to organize the Reunification Department in 1956, still runs it, and who is not also General Giap's Deputy Chief of Staff, is, geographically, a South Vietnamese. He ~~rose~~ rose through the Communist military ranks while fighting in South Vietnam during the Franco-Viet Minh war. The leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party thinks of the Party as precisely that -- the Vietnamese Communist Party, not the North Vietnamese Communist Party. The state structure this Party controls thinks of itself, and speaks of itself, as the "Democratic Republic of Vietnam" -- not North Vietnam. Party Politburo member Le Duan, who is First Secretary of the Party and runs the Party apparatus, and his Politburo colleague Pham Van Dong, who is Premier of the DRV and runs the state structure, were both born south of the 17th Parallel. In the eyes of the Party leadership -- to cite a phrase appearing constantly in ^rarty propaganda and policy statements -- "Vietnam is one." Ho and his senior colleagues have always adamantly rejected the notion that there can be a political entity called "South Vietnam"

with any right to political existence independent of Vietnamese Communist Party control. It is essential to grasp this fundamental outlook of our adversaries because this outlook shapes and has shaped all of their major decisions, actions, and attitudes.

What Ho and his Party colleagues saw evolving in that summer of 1956 was precisely what they could not tolerate -- a Vietnamese political structure the Party did not control, capable of governing a sizeable portion of Vietnamese territory. To combat this intolerable development, the Party took steps to prepare for armed struggle. These steps included the establishment of General Vinh's "Reunification Department," which was given administrative control over the 90,000 odd southern Viet Minh veterans, supporters and their families who had come north in 1954 under the regroupment provisions of the Geneva Accords. These "regroupees" constituted a resource pool that figured prominently in the Politburo's developing plans.

In addition to the "regroupees" overtly taken north in 1954, the Party also left behind in South Vietnam a covert organization and apparatus whose continued presence in the south constituted a clear violation of the Geneva settlement agreements. In the immediate post-Geneva period, this southern Party organization's mission was to lie low, await favorable developments, and agitate covertly in favor of the 1956 elections. This southern apparatus was the Hanoi Politburo's primary source of information on political developments south of the 17th Parallel. As Diem solidified his government's position and extended its effective writ, the Party's southern apparatus found life increasingly

difficult and saw itself faced with a real threat of being disintegrated and eliminated. The Communists' southern cadre argued with increasing intensity that the struggle had to be resumed before it was too late. Their views eventually prevailed in Hanoi, partly because their case was argued in the Politburo itself by a very powerful Politburo member, Le Duan. The personal Party careers of Le Duan and of his Politburo colleague Le Duc Tho -- now head of Hanoi's Paris negotiation delegation -- are important and need to be understood. These two Party leaders have had a critical influence on the course of the entire struggle and their views help shape Hanoi's present policy. Their policy views, in turn, are heavily influenced by the course of their own careers. During the Franco-Viet Minh war, the Politburo divided Vietnam into three regional commands: North, Center and South. The southern region -- or Nambo -- comprised, roughly, the southern half of what we now call South Vietnam. In 1951, the then head of the Nambo, Nguyen Binh, launched a premature general offensive against the French in the Mekong Delta. The disastrous failure of Binh's grandiose effort left the Nambo organization shattered and reeling. For his failure, Binh was recalled and -- on Politburo orders -- executed while en route to Ho's northern headquarters. In 1952, the Politburo dispatched Le Duan to take over the southern command and repair the damage. Soon thereafter, Le Duc Tho was dispatched to serve as Le Duan's deputy. Together these two men organized and ran the Central Office for South Vietnam, or COSVN -- the Communist Party command echelon which ran the Viet Minh effort during the latter years of the struggle against the French. The name COSVN structure, the

one Le Duan and Le Duc Tho built, runs the Viet Cong effort in South Vietnam today.

After the 1954 Geneva Conference, Le Duan remained in South Vietnam as field director of the Party's southern organization. It was he who saw at first hand the failure of the Politburo's political gamble on post-Geneva developments. It was also Le Duan who had to cope with the concrete consequences of this failure. When the Party's draconian "Land Reform" purges in the north built up so much resentment that some adjustments had to be made, ~~XXXXXXXX~~ Truong Chinh was relieved of his duties as Party First Secretary. In late 1956 or early 1957, Le Duan was recalled to Hanoi to replace Truong Chinh as administrative head of the Party and he has been the First Secretary ever since. Thus you have at least three key Politburo members whose Party careers are intimately involved in the fate, and success, of the southern struggle: Le Duan, the head of the Party's administrative apparatus; Le Duc Tho, Hanoi's chief negotiator; and Pham Hung (another southerner) who today occupies Le Duan's old position as the head of COSVN.

IX

In early 1957, what has been called "the second Indochina war" was begun by a conscious Politburo decision made in Hanoi after much deliberation and debate. At the outset of the resumed struggle, primary emphasis was laid on relatively small scale acts of terrorism and subversion whose

collective purpose was to check the political progress of Diem's government, exacerbate the historically rooted divisions and tensions in South Vietnamese society, and break the Saigon Government's points of contact with South Vietnam's rural population. Communist Party's objectives were to re-create the anarchic atmosphere of 1954, build and expand an insurgent organization kept under tight Party control but enlisting as many dissident persons and groups as possible into its ranks, and thus put progressively increasing pressure on Diem's fledgling government that would inhibit its effectiveness and, ultimately, cause its collapse.

Selective and often brutal assassination soon became one of the Party's principal tactics. The persons and families of Saigon's best and its worst officials were the favored targets: the former because they constituted a political threat, the latter because their elimination enhanced the "Robin Hood" image the Party was trying to project. The chosen victims of Party terror included not only such obvious targets as Saigon provincial administrators, village chiefs and police officials but also such persons as rural school teachers, village nurses, even members of malaria eradicating mosquito control teams -- anyone, in short, whose activities redounded to the Saigon Government's political benefit.

This initial Communist campaign complicated the problems of the Saigon Government and slowed its pace of political progress. The Party's campaign did not prove sufficient to topple the government, however, or pose any serious threat to its continued existence. In the early summer of 1959, the Hanoi Politburo reviewed the bidding once again and decided to escalate

the struggle into a "war of national liberation." Soon thereafter the scale and scope of Communist military activity in the south began to increase by quantum jumps. North Vietnamese military operations in Laos established Communist control over Laotian territory adjacent to the Vietnamese border and work was begun on developing the logistic support network through Laos known as the "Ho Chi Minh trail." Southern Viet Minh veterans, or their children, in the regroupee pool were selected, trained and organized under the direction of General Vinh's Reunification Department and dispatched to the south in an ever increasing stream. These "returnees" were not sent south to provide raw manpower for the burgeoning insurgent movement but, rather, to serve as organizers, technicians and disciplined leaders -- trained and trusted cadre, all ethnic southerners, who would build the movement, lead it, but keep it under tight Communist Party control.

At the time of President Kennedy's election, Hanoi had dispatched at least 4,600 of these returnees to South Vietnam -- (the American military advisory presence in the south at that time, incidentally, totalled 875 officers and men). When President Johnson took office three years later, Hanoi had sent south 31,700 returnees that we know of. The US advisory and assistance effort had perforce increased, but at the end of 1963 totalled only 16,263.

In late 1960, to provide a political cover for its rapidly expanding insurgent campaign, Hanoi announced the creation of a "National Liberation Front" in South Vietnam, an allegedly indigenous -- i. e., southern -- and

spontaneously formed a coalition of southern political groups opposed to the Diem government. In point of fact, the NLF was a pure Party creation, the lineal descendent of earlier Party front groups created for similar purposes in North Vietnam such as the Lien Viet and the Fatherland Front. Ever since its creation, the Party has tried to advance the fiction that the NLF is an independent political body sympathetically supported by the DRV, (and, it is sometimes admitted, by the Party) but possessed of a separate will and existence. Of late, particularly since the commencement of negotiations in Paris, Hanoi has tried to encourage the belief that there is an "NLF position" on important Vietnamese issues separate, distinct and different from the DRV position.

In point of fact, the Vietnamese Communist Party, as a single organization, controls both the DRV and the NLF. As is always the case, there are certainly stresses and differing opinions between the field command in the south -- COSVN -- and the Politburo in Hanoi. The debates that count, however, are carried on in Party channels, all the major decisions are made by the Hanoi Politburo, and the command line over both the Party and the NLF runs through Party channels from Hanoi through COSVN, Regional Party committees, Provincial Party committees, and District Party committees to every village in South Vietnam in which there is a Party cell. The Front's chief negotiator in Paris, Tran Buu Khiem, is a long time Party member. Hanoi's chief negotiator in Paris is the former Deputy Director of COSVN.

X

During the critical and complex period between 1959 and 1963, the pace and pressure of the Communist-directed insurgency steadily mounted and the political life of South Vietnam became progressively more troubled by dissension and discord within the non-Communist ranks. This discord, as you know, culminated in Diem's overthrow and assassination in November 1963. The important political point here is that the Communists had little or no hand in the movement which actually overthrew Diem. In fact, almost the only point on which Diem's internal opponents were in agreement was their unwillingness to accept or countenance Communist participation in their anti-Diem efforts. The consideration which tipped the scale in the minds of the military officers who actually overthrew him was their belief that, by 1963, Diem's style of rule had become one of the Communists' principal assets and that unless he was overthrown, a Communist victory would be inevitable.

At the 9th Plenum of the Party's Central Committee, held in Hanoi in December 1963 shortly after Diem's overthrow, the Party made another basic decision, namely to escalate the struggle to a new level by adding the ingredient of direct North Vietnamese participation. The debate was sharp and the decision far from unanimous, but the argument which carried the day was that by striking intensively, Hanoi could eradicate its non-Communist opponents in the south before they sorted out their own political problems and thus, with the added direct northern input, achieve total victory in a

short span of time. Hanoi also recognized that if it did not strike while the moment was opportune, it ran the risk of facing a Saigon Government possessed of Diem's early strengths and without his regime's later weaknesses.

The first tangible indications of this December 1963 decision for escalation was a change in the composition of the increasing flow of infiltrators. Ethnic North Vietnamese soldiers soon began to show up, not as cadre, technicians or leaders but as strength-augmenting replacements. By the summer of 1964, line units of the North Vietnamese Army were being readied for dispatch to the south. By the fall of 1964, the first of these units were moving through Laos. By the end of 1964 and the beginning of 1965, organized North Vietnamese Army units began appearing on South Vietnam's battlefields.

You almost certainly have heard it argued that this "North Vietnamization" of the struggle -- which by 1966 was undeniable and unconcealable -- constituted Hanoi's response to America's 1965 "escalation." This argument is simply not supported by the facts of the case. The policy decision to add direct North Vietnamese intervention to the fray was taken in Hanoi over a year before our bombing campaign began and almost eighteen months before the first US combat troops were dispatched to cope with the problems created by this direct northern invasion.

XI

Hanoi's strategy of direct North Vietnamese intervention came within a whisker of success. By the spring of 1965, the South Vietnamese Army was being whipsawed and the Saigon Government was on the verge of collapse. The smell of defeat was almost tangibly in the air. Had it not been for the dispatch of US combat troops to counter Hanoi's direct invasion, the VC flag would probably have been flying over Saigon before the end of 1965.

With North Vietnam and the US both taking a direct and progressively larger hand in the fighting, the war entered a new stage that lasted from the summer of 1965 through the summer of 1967. Militarily the situation stabilized, generally in favor of the allies but without either side's securing a clear cut advantage. A Communist victory was prevented and allied forces broke the Communists' former monopoly hold over the strategic initiative. Through an intensive manpower and logistic infiltration effort exploiting the sanctuary status of Laos and Cambodia, however, Hanoi progressively increased the size of the Communist military force in South Vietnam, improved its weaponry (thanks of Soviet and Chinese assistance), and increased the threat that force could pose. Communist manpower losses were high, but in Hanoi's judgment, supportable.

Politically the picture was also mixed, but the overall political trend of these two years ran much more in Saigon's favor than Hanoi's.

The government which came to power as a military junta in May 1965 provided, for all its faults, more stability and effective leadership than South Vietnam had seen since Diem's overthrow. Of more profound import, this government sponsored and directed a constitution writing and electoral process which can make no claim to perfection but which has created the institutional outlines of a viable state structure and has transmuted the former junta into a government whose claims to constitutional legitimacy and electoral mandate cannot be lightly dismissed.

The September 1967 Presidential elections perhaps constitute the best benchmark and indicator of the state of South Vietnamese political development as of that time. Despite the fact that there was almost certainly some fiddling of the returns from some precincts, these elections compared favorably in terms of honesty and openness with elections held anywhere else in the world. About 57 percent of South Vietnam's entire adult population -- Communists, anti-Communists and all in between -- participated in these elections. Since there were eleven competing tickets (in itself a symptomatic indication of South Vietnam's lack of political cohesion), it is hardly surprising that no single ticket won an absolute majority. The ticket of President Thieu and Vice President Ky won the election by taking 34.8 percent of the total vote. Thieu's Prime Minister, Tran Van Huong and his running mate (now a government Minister) won 10.01 percent of the total vote. If one thinks of the present Saigon Government as a coalition, which it is, the aggregate electoral mandate of the government's top leaders comprises almost 45 percent of the total vote, a figure not to be despised.

One "neutralist" candidate ran in the 1967 election and received about 17 percent of the total vote. The significant fact here, however, is not so much his 17 percent but the fact that 83 percent of the vote was split among ten candidates, all of whom were adamantly opposed to Communist rule and to any concessions to the Communist side. These figures reflect with reasonable accuracy several important facts about South Vietnamese life. The spectrum of those opposed to Communist rule runs from almost the extreme left over to the extreme right. In the aggregate, this spectrum encompasses the overwhelming majority of politicized South Vietnamese -- were this not the case, the struggle would have inevitably ended in a Communist victory years ago. Though the majority of politically conscious Vietnamese in South Vietnam may agree on not wanting to live under Communist domination, that is virtually the only thing many of them do agree on. Furthermore, dislike for the Communists does not readily -- and certainly does not necessarily -- translate to positive support for any particular non-Communist government in Saigon. Thus although South Vietnam made considerable political progress since the desperate spring of 1965, the basic problem of division and discord among the non-Communist majority is still far from solved.

XII

During the summer of 1967, Hanoi took another long, hard look at the course of the war. After a Party Politburo and Central Committee level debate that lasted more than two months, Hanoi adopted a new set of

strategic decisions which are still guiding Hanoi's actions today. This strategy was designed to reverse those military and political trends in the situation that Hanoi found disquieting and simultaneously enhance what Hanoi regarded as the Communist cause's principal strengths or assets -- including the rising level of opposition to the war throughout the world and, particularly, within the United States.

In essence, this strategy involved a massive military, political and diplomatic effort to tip the scales of struggle irrevocably in the Communists' favor during 1968 and 1969. Materially, this new strategy involved the dispatch of an additional 300,000 North Vietnamese troops to South Vietnam during the period between September 1967 and September 1968 -- more than the entire manpower input of all previous years. Militarily, the keystone of this plan was the 1968 Tet offensive. Politically and diplomatically, the major new ingredient was to be the opening of negotiations. The reason Hanoi replied with such alacrity to President Johnson's 31 March 1968 speech is that, in effect, President Johnson pre-empted Hanoi in a move the Politburo had already decided to make at a time of its own choosing.

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Since the course of the past two years events are certainly much better known to all of you than the historical background that produced them, I will not take the time to discuss these events in detail. Hanoi's new strategy has materially altered the climate, dynamics and format of the struggle. The 1968 Tet offensive had a major impact in Vietnam and, particularly, abroad. The fact of ongoing negotiations has set new forces

and factors in train that condition the behavior of all participants. The overall balance sheet on the past two years, however, cannot yet be drawn.

Militarily, the past eighteen-odd months have not been happy ones for our adversaries. The 1968 Tet offensive wrecked great havoc and rocked the Saigon Government, but in purely military terms it constituted an overall Communist defeat. The follow-on offensives of May and August were even less successful. So far, the current round of Communist activity that began on the night of 23 February 1969, though noisy at times, has been contained and frustrated at every turn. I might also add that it has been pinpointed and called at every turn by allied intelligence. Our current information, including captured documents and prisoner interrogations suggest that the Communists have abandoned even the hope of military victory and scaled their military objectives to the more modest goal of sustaining enough activity to keep US casualties up, demonstrating their continued presence, and preventing any dramatic allied breakthroughs.

Politically, though the GVN was stunned by the Tet offensive, it recovered enough to make 1968 a year of net achievement and is now probably stronger and more confident than any Saigon Government has been since mid-1957. Many problems of course remain, ~~however~~ Despite improvements, the ties of union binding our South Vietnamese allies are still very fragile.

Increasingly effective Vietnamese and allied programs are beginning to make some inroads into the Communists' political apparatus -- the so-called infrastructure -- but the structure is still basically intact and very formidable. Our adversaries are having increasing problems with morale, discouragement, despondency and desertion or defection. These problems must be worrisome to Hanoi, but our information does not indicate that they are yet critical.

Hanoi's current policies reflect an amalgam of all the factors outlined above. It is interested in seeing if a solution to the war can be negotiated, but it also sees the negotiations as a vehicle for exacerbating tensions between the US and ~~the~~ South Vietnam and for generating political pressure on the US Government. Its willingness to negotiate a settlement is also influenced by the Politburo's reluctance to acknowledge the Saigon Government's right to exist. Furthermore, Hanoi must recognize that Thieu's government in 1969 is stronger in every respect than Diem's was in 1954. Having gambled once with ideal odds and lost, Hanoi is patently reluctant to gamble again when the odds are clearly worse.

At the moment Hanoi seems locked in to a policy of more of the same: keeping up what pressure it can on the battlefield, conducting all possible political agitation in South Vietnam and stonewalling at the negotiating table. This policy rests on the assumption that the end is reasonably near and that if Hanoi waits patiently but a few months longer, domestic pressures in the US will force our government to make major concessions that will

unblock the situation and start events moving rapidly in Hanoi's favor. There is therefore little prospect of a dramatic shift in the Vietnam situation until Hanoi's basic policy assumption is either vindicated or changed.