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VIETNAM IN RETROSPECT*

Ellsworth Bunker

I am both complimented and pleased that I should have been invited to speak to this particular assemblage whose membership includes so many friends and former colleagues. I recently spoke to the Senior Seminar of this Agency, informally, and now I am glad of the opportunity to speak to all of you, because now that our part in the war in Vietnam is over perhaps it can be viewed in a more dispassionate manner. I think too there are useful lessons to be learned from our involvement in this the longest—and perhaps the most complex and difficult—war in which we have ever engaged.

One of the lessons which the war taught us again is the fact that a democracy cannot successfully prosecute a war unless the war has public support. Woodrow Wilson found this to be true in my generation's war—World War I—when he saw that our interests were vitally involved long before he could bring the public opinion to this view. So, too, with Roosevelt in World War II who knew that our national interests would require our involvement long before Pearl Harbor made it inevitable. There was little enthusiasm for the Korean War but this, at least, had the endorsement and sanction of the U.N. and thus the support of a large body of world opinion.

As time went on during my sojourn in Saigon I became conscious of the effect a committed journalism can have on the conduct of foreign policy. In Vietnam there was continuously a very large press corps—from 400 to as many as 650 as the fortunes of the struggle, military or political, waxed or waned. I believe its influence undoubtedly was more evident—for good or ill—on the course of events in Vietnam than in any war in which we had been engaged, for this was the first war in which there was no censorship, and the first war fought on television. For the first time the brutalities and horrors which are common to all wars—Vietnam was not an exception—were freely reported in the Press and through TV came into everyone's living room.

Given the fact that newsworthiness is enhanced by the dramatic or sensational, it is not hard to understand the emphasis these received in the reporting of events in Vietnam. For example, a revolutionary land reform program which may have far more effect socially, economically, politically—even ideologically—on the lives of millions of South Vietnamese than the military aspects of the war, goes virtually unnoticed. Thus I think it was difficult here to get a balanced view of the situation in Vietnam. I recognize, of course, that that is not the objective of a committed position and that the country was bitterly divided by the war.

It is clear that the war in Vietnam did not have the kind of public support which other wars had. Americans are an impatient people and as the war dragged

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on—in part because of restrictions we imposed on ourselves—support diminished and time ran out. Yet I think the American people did support the President—indeed the election, I believe, demonstrated in fact—in his determination to achieve an honorable settlement of the war. He saw clearly that this was essential to the maintenance of our position as a great power, to the trust of our allies, and to the credibility of our commitments.

This was made the more difficult by the changes which had taken place in the world scene and particularly in the American view of our role in the world since our first involvement during the Kennedy Administration—you will recall his inaugural statement: "Let friend and foe alike know that the American people will take any risk and bear any burden in the defense of freedom"—to the perception today of a more realistic view of the limitations on our capabilities.

I pass over the question whether or not we should have become involved. Strong views are held by proponents and opponents, and I am content to leave the ultimate verdict to history.

Why, you may ask, did this war with a small, weak country last so long, why was it so difficult and complex?

The first, and generalized, answer, I think, is the fact the war was new to the American experience. It differed radically from any other war in which we had ever been engaged. It was both a conventional war and a guerrilla war; a war of aggression and a civil war; a war without front lines; a war in which the enemy could retreat to sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos to reinforce, reequip, and return to the battle. It was also a political war, a psychological war, an economic war. Because the war was new to the American experience, we had to learn how to fight it as we went along—this took time, and inevitably we made mistakes and misjudgments.

We had viewed it from the beginning as a limited war, fought for limited objectives and therefore with limited resources; and I think by implication we viewed it as limited in time. But I think another lesson that became clear is the fact that a limited war with limited objectives against an adversary whose objectives are unlimited and who possesses, or is provided, the resources to wage unrestrained war is not a viable policy. For a variety of reasons which seemed valid at the time but which in retrospect seem less so, we placed restrictions on the resources we employed and the manner in which we employed them. Had we been willing to do earlier some of the things we actually did late in the war, I believe it could have been materially shortened.

We underestimated, too, the tenacity, discipline, and staying power of both our opponents and our allies—and the Asian fatalistic view of life and death which contributed to their willingness to go on taking casualties at a rate difficult for Westerners to contemplate. Thus in the beginning we overestimated our ability to cope with our adversaries and delayed too long the training of the South Vietnamese forces to take over the full responsibility for their own defense. This was particularly true of the territorial forces—the so-called regional and popular forces. Yet they *were* trained and equipped into an effective fighting force, prepared and willing to take over the defense of their country—as President Thieu stated unequivocally in his speech at the National Press Club last April.

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The South Vietnamese people, too, have exhibited tenacity, resourcefulness, and courage. Their country devastated, homes destroyed, children killed or maimed—the Vietnamese people have never abandoned their goal of freedom. Together our two governments have prevented the forcible imposition of Communist rule on South Vietnam, and the program of Vietnamization has provided the people of South Vietnam with the strength to build their own society without outside interference.

I think it is perhaps appropriate that I digress here at the halfway mark of my general remarks on Vietnam to address more specifically several of the points I was asked to cover by your Director of Training, Mr. Rodriguez. He thought you might be particularly interested in hearing my views on the contribution of American intelligence to our overall national effort in Vietnam, and to touch upon my role as the manager of the Country Team and of the several unique programs involving rather extensive coordination among American agencies and the Vietnamese Government. He also asked me to touch upon Southeast Asia in the foreseeable future. This last point I shall leave until the conclusion of my remarks.

I am glad, first of all, to have the opportunity to acknowledge the fact that in all of the posts in which I have served I have found the Agency to be indispensable. I am sure this is true of any Ambassador who has served in a sensitive post. This was especially true in Vietnam.

As it is always good to see ourselves as others see us, I thought that you might be interested in knowing how the Agency is viewed from a Latin American viewpoint. As I have just returned from a trip to Panama, I will read from the transcript of a question-and-answer session which the Army War College recently had with General Omar Torrijos. General Torrijos was asked about the CIA involvement in the political affairs of Latin American countries. He replied:

"Let's be frank. The CIA is not a benevolent institution and is not well looked upon in Latin America, just as you would not look well upon a foreign intelligence agency penetrating the U.S. Here in Panama they act openly. They are people with whom you can speak and talk, considering always that their passports have a different color than ours. In reading the memoirs of the war in Vietnam I realized that the CIA was becoming progressive. They are improving the quality and human conditioning of their members. The problems that exist in intelligence agencies are that they get paid information. All paid information is prostituted. Their sources want money and make up information to get it. Our local services get information out of the good will and cooperation of our people. Much of the reason for a lack of knowledge and understanding in the U.S. is that these agencies play around consulting with people who do not know the answers. When I was lieutenant, one agency offered \$500 for every Communist who could be identified. In one year 36,000 were discovered. Then, it came to me that we couldn't have more Communists than does Moscow. The sources were more interested in their \$500 than they were in the truth." Well, that is one Latin leader's viewpoint.

Getting back to Southeast Asia. During my tenure in Vietnam there was probably the largest Agency representation anywhere in the world—about 600 personnel, which has now been reduced to around 400. The role of the Agency in Vietnam was indispensable, both in waging the war and in the negotiations

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leading to a settlement. The relations of Agency personnel with the Government of Vietnam were excellent; they established that element of trust on the part of their Vietnamese counterparts so essential to successful intelligence operations. Their relationships and cooperation with the U.S. military command structure could not have been improved upon. Generally, two Agency officers attended the daily intelligence briefing of the MACV chief of intelligence and the weekly intelligence estimate update to General Westmoreland and later to General Abrams. At these sessions their comments and their analysis of current intelligence were always solicited, and they made a much appreciated contribution.

The valor of Agency personnel, especially during the 1968 Tet offensive, was noteworthy. Three Agency officers were involved in the actual defense of the Embassy when it came under attack on the first night of the offensive, January 31, 1968. They were armed with Berrettas and a snub-nosed .38 pistol—they stood their ground and fought against the Viet Cong armed with automatic weapons.

In II Corps, an Agency official was last seen being led away blindfolded by NVA soldiers, and in the center of Hue in I Corps, an Agency officer was reported to have waited in the hallway of his house with an automatic weapon to stall the searching NVA soldiers, while his associates fled through the garden to safety. He was never seen again. These anecdotes are but a few of the many told about your colleagues during this most difficult and complex war.

As to the contribution of American Intelligence as I saw it, there were two types of primary interest to my day-to-day functions. One was war-related or tactical current intelligence, in which most Ambassadors generally don't become deeply involved. However, obviously for an American Ambassador in Saigon during a hot war, this kind of intelligence became critically important, for without an accurate picture of the enemy's capabilities and intentions, the director of the Country Team could not function. For the most part I was provided this type of information through military intelligence channels augmented by the many Agency reporters scattered throughout the four regions of the country. In general I believe the quality of this basic military intelligence to have been both timely and accurate during the time that I was in Saigon.

Good tactical intelligence was not, of course, enough. In his recent study "Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam," Bob Komer commented that "All too little attention was paid by military intelligence to the operational code or tactical style of the enemy and to the fact that his tactics as well as his goals were as much political as military." This may have been true in the beginning, but I think that General Abrams and his successor, General Weyand, were well aware of these factors. It was, however, to the Central Intelligence Agency that I looked for this political intelligence.

I might add that Communists were not, of course, the only target of our political intelligence efforts. The United States commitment in Vietnam was all-embracing. Consequently knowledge concerning internal political and economic developments was of critical importance. We simply couldn't afford unpleasant "surprises." And there were times during the secret peace negotiations when we had as many difficulties with our friends as with our adversaries.

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This type of intelligence was crucial in assisting me and the Country Team to make the almost daily serious decisions demanded of us. I must say that with very few exceptions the quality of your colleagues' product—both in the scope of the collection and the astuteness and the timeliness of the analysis—contributed significantly to the decisions which we made—and I hope they were on the plus side.

Obviously in intelligence, like any other field of human endeavor, one is most remembered for one's failures. No one recalls the correct predictions; but they never let you forget your mistakes. In this regard I suppose Tet 1968 has received the most publicity as our "intelligence failure."

Actually I don't believe our intelligence performance in 1968 was that poor. We had good advance warning that some sort of offensive was going to take place over the Tet holidays. There may have been some slowness in appreciating the full scope of what Hanoi was going to undertake, and though the alarm was sounded throughout the country, not all tactical commanders chose to take heed.

The Phoenix program was another area in which your personnel were deeply involved and though there has been considerable criticism of the program, notably in the press, it contributed substantially to the success of the overall pacification effort in the years after 1968 by assisting in personal identification and population control and the ferretting out of the insidious Viet Cong infrastructure which had for so long fed the flames of the war.

The development of an adequate GVN intelligence service could not have taken place without the very strong contribution made by hundreds of lower-level Central Intelligence Agency operatives. Their patience, their imagination and initiatives and their understanding of the critical necessity of preparing the Vietnamese to develop their own intelligence services to sustain themselves after our departure was all in all a first rate piece of work.

Several critical questions seem to almost pop out of discussions of this nature and we might as well address them now. Was the CIA too operationally oriented in its activities in the Vietnam war and for that matter elsewhere in Southeast Asia? Should the Agency have concentrated only on intelligence collection? I am not sure that I know the answer to these questions. This war was new to our experience, and we had to learn as we went along. Certainly some of your colleagues had misgivings about the Agency's role, and this was reflected in a declining emphasis in such activities in the last several years. Whether or not the Agency is employed in operational roles in future wars—God forbid we have any—I should think the Agency role would be determined only after a sound analysis has been made of intelligence activities during the Vietnam era. The second question which is really an extension of the first—Is it really feasible for a democracy to carry on clandestine operations on the level we did in South Vietnam and in Laos? Given the public criticism and the criticism strongly expressed in the media during the latter years of our war in Southeast Asia one would think that much care would be exercised in coming to a decision to operate in a similar manner in other arenas.

Now, I would like to turn to the present situation in Vietnam and then to future prospects.

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By any reasonable measure, the situation is better today than before the January 27 agreement. Our prisoners are home; our forces are disengaged.

On the other hand, the war's fundamental issue remains unresolved: North Vietnam is still determined to gain political power in South Vietnam, by force if necessary; the South Vietnamese Government and the great majority of the South Vietnamese people are still determined to prevent this. Consequently, the climate of mutual trust and goodwill necessary to bring about national reconciliation does not yet exist.

Implementation of the ceasefire agreement has been unsatisfactory because:

Ceasefire violations are numerous, and they have become more serious in the past two months.

Communist obstructionism has prevented ceasefire supervisory bodies from functioning effectively.

There has been no progress toward a political settlement between the Vietnamese parties.

The Communists have not cooperated in resolving the status of our men missing in action.

The North Vietnamese have continued to infiltrate men and materiel into the South, recently increasing this infiltration back to wartime levels. Consequently, the Communists now have at least as many troops as they did in South Vietnam before the 1972 offensive, adequate supplies to support them in an extended campaign, and improved logistic systems and tactical positions.

Most intelligence analysts appear to believe the odds are close to even that the North Vietnamese will undertake a major offensive this dry season (i.e., before June 1974) to achieve their unchanged goal of attaining political power in the South. If the Communists do not attack during that period, they may well do so a year later. I believe the offensive could take two forms:

Massive, coordinated assaults on all fronts, as in 1972; or

A creeping offensive, with gradually increased pressure on weak spots in South Vietnamese defenses, culminating in large-scale assaults against major targets. This option could be the more likely, because it would obscure the question of who is to blame for the renewed fighting, and make a potential U.S. decision to intervene far more difficult. In fact, we could perhaps be seeing the beginning stage of such an offensive now.

I do not want to predict the outcome of such offensives. I am very impressed at the tenacious way in which the South Vietnamese fought against the Communists in 1972. However, relative to the Communists, the South Vietnamese are militarily no stronger now than in 1972, and they now lack the U.S. air support which was a decisive factor in containing the 1972 offensive. Consequently, a return to full-scale hostilities would pose a serious threat to South Vietnam.

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Therefore the issue remains. Major military and political provisions of the Paris Agreement have not been implemented, and an extensive North Vietnamese build-up threatens a return to all-out warfare.

However, the U.S. position remains clear. Our objective is to deter a North Vietnamese offensive, and, should deterrence fail, to do everything we legally can to help the South Vietnamese meet it successfully.

Whether there is ultimate peace in Indochina will depend in the final analysis on the three major powers—the U.S., the Soviet Union and China. While I believe that South Vietnam will defend itself against future armed attacks by North Vietnam, and against subversion, clearly it cannot do so if we withdraw our assistance and Russia and China continue to give military and economic aid to Hanoi. The hope, therefore, is that both the Soviets and Chinese have larger interests they wish to pursue with us—interests that go beyond the problem of Indochina—and that together with them we shall be able to exercise on both sides the restraint necessary to induce them to continue the struggle in political terms.

As long as the great powers continue to exercise the restraint they have shown thus far in the ceasefire period, I believe the outlook is for continuation of the current no-war, no-peace situation, with the South Vietnamese Government maintaining its position of relative strength.

Should the North Vietnamese, however, decide to gamble on another major offensive, an entirely new situation would be created, the parameters of which simply cannot be predicted.

Over the longer run, I hope that the process of national reconciliation will at last begin, and true peace, with self-determination, can be brought to these people for whom all too long war has been a way of life. A hopeful development was the signing last September in Laos of the accord setting up a coalition government. In Cambodia the two sides seem to be approaching a balance of forces which may also lead to a somewhat similar accommodation.

The costs of the struggle, in which we were joined, have been huge—in lives, in treasure, in the destruction of homes, people uprooted, in the divisions in our own country. But I believe history will determine that it has not been in vain. One small country has gained a chance at self-determination. Other nations nearby have gained the time to create a more stable Asia. The U.S. has demonstrated to other nations that it had the will to accept the responsibilities of power and to assure the credibility of its commitments. And the great powers of the world have, through this war, evolved a way to replace confrontation with diplomacy.

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