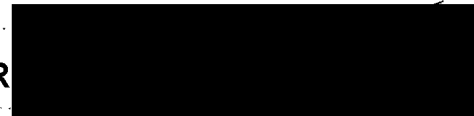


9 SEP 1971



Reason for Being in Vietnam:

By Art Buchwald

The "Why Are We in Vietnam Committee," otherwise known as WAWIVNC, held its monthly meeting at the State Department last week, and for the first time there was an air of pessimism in the room. As everyone knows, WAWIVNC was set up many years ago to provide Presidents of the United States with solid reasons for American involvement in Vietnam.

Some of the reasons the committee has come up with in the past are:

- A. To halt Communist aggression from the north.
- B. To let Red China know we mean business.
- C. To prevent Southeast Asian countries from falling like dominoes.
- D. To keep American boys from having to fight on the shores of Hawaii.

E. To prove to Hanoi we are not a helpless giant.

F. To make sure the South Vietnamese people can choose their own leaders in Democratic elections. This last one was everyone's favorite. President Nixon kept repeating it in every speech about Indo-China. Secretary of State Rogers, Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker in Saigon, and Ambassador David Bruce in Paris, all said the same thing: "The United States wants nothing for itself. It is only in South Vietnam to assure that the people there can decide their own fate."

You can imagine what happened at the WAWIVNC meeting when they were informed that President Thieu would be the only one on the ballot in the presidential elections on Oct. 3.

The chairman of the committee said "Gentlemen, I have just heard from President Nixon. He is very disappointed that no one has chosen to run against President Thieu and is once again hard put to explain what the United States is doing in Vietnam."

"Well, it isn't our fault that Vice President Ky wouldn't run against Thieu, or that General Minh bowed out of the race weeks ago," an assistant secretary of public affairs said.

"How did we know that Thieu would rig the elections so badly that even the opposition would see through him?" a USIA psychological warfare expert said.

"Thieu should have warned Ky and Minh that they either had to run against him in democratic elections or they would be shot," a CIA man said.

"That's not the point, gentlemen," the chairman of the committee said. "The fact is that Thieu is running alone. This is not our concern except that since it's now

Because It's There

difficult for President Nixon to defend the American presence in Vietnam to guarantee free elections, we have to find him another reason to explain why we are still there. Now think."

"Suppose," an AID man said, "the President says the reason we are in Vietnam is to protect the American dollar?"

"I don't follow you."

"Well, we all know every high official in the South Vietnamese government has a secret Swiss bank account where he has stashed away millions of dollars. Now, if these officials traded their dollars in Switzerland for marks or French francs while the dollar is floating it could hurt us badly."

"But as long as we remain in South Vietnam these officials will have faith in us and will keep their dollars in Switzerland." "It's too complicated," the chairman said. "I want something simple."

"Suppose we say we're in Vietnam because we must protect freedom wherever it is found," a Pentagon man said.

There was dead silence in the room.

Finally the chairman said, "there has to be a reason that no one has yet thought of."

A State Department man scribbled something on a sheet of paper and then raised his hand. "This is it. The President must go on television tomorrow night and tell the American people the only reason we are in Vietnam is because it's there."

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FEBRUARY, 1968

by John B. Henry II

In the spring of 1970 John Henry, then a junior at Harvard, began, on an "off the record" basis, interviewing the main civilian and military officials of the Johnson Administration. Mr. Henry had an undergraduate honors thesis to write. He wanted to explore in depth how U.S. policy-makers in February and March of 1968 reached a number of critical decisions, culminating in President Johnson's announcement of his political retirement. The result is a narrative reconstruction of how U.S. policy was made from the time of the Communist Tet offensive (January 30-February 4, 1968) up to the President's speech of March 31, 1968.

FOREIGN POLICY believes that the Henry interviews add an important dimension to our knowledge of the history of the period by shedding new light on the motivations and behavior of U.S. policy-makers. Therefore we are presenting a significant portion of the 35,000 word Henry thesis, covering military decision-making during February, 1968. Persons directly quoted in this article have given the author permission for such quotation. Further parts of the Henry study are to be published in The Atlantic Monthly.—The Editors.

I. The Tet Offensive

On February 3, four days after the outbreak of the Tet offensive, President Johnson told General Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (jcs), to ask General Westmoreland "if there is any reinforcement or help we can give you." In public, Johnson said that the Tet offensive was a failure for the Communists; but in private he prodded the U.S. military for reassurance. Wheeler cabled the President's question to Saigon, adding a note of special concern about the U.S. garrison besieged at Khesanh.

Since early 1966 Westmoreland's strategy had been to divide military responsibilities between American and South Vietnamese forces. U.S. forces conducted most offensive operations against the "bully boys" (the North Vietnamese and Vietcong main force units), thereby constituting a "shield" behind which the South Vietnamese would concentrate on providing area security and eradicat-

ing the "termites" (Vietcong guerrillas). When the enemy simultaneously assaulted most of the cities in South Vietnam at Tet, Westmoreland was forced to redeploy his troops in order to compensate for the ARVN's failure to provide adequate protection. As a result, Westmoreland's campaign plans for 1968 were severely disrupted.

Westmoreland reported to Washington that the enemy had dealt the GVN a "severe blow" by bringing the war to the towns and cities and thus inflicting costly damage and casualties on the population. CIA reported that the enemy intended to instigate a popular uprising in South Vietnam, and that the Vietcong were spreading the rumor that the Americans supported VC efforts since the Americans wanted to stop the war through encouragement of a coalition government.

Back in Washington, news of the stunned South Vietnamese government and the enemy's costly assaults on the cities had caused serious worry. If things continued to get worse, a shaky South Vietnamese government might fall and be succeeded by coalitionists, jeopardizing American goals in Vietnam. President Johnson and his advisers also had another fear: that the enemy might concentrate on the takeover of a South Vietnamese city, run up a North Vietnamese flag, and proclaim to an attentive world the first liberated zone and the true capital of South Vietnam. On February 8, in a message to Westmoreland, Wheeler expressed Washington's fear of a forced coalition government:

There is a theory, which could be logical, that over-all enemy strategy is to attack and attrite the ARVN and thereby destroying them and ultimately gaining acceptance by the people of the coalition government which would request the withdrawal of U.S. forces in South Vietnam.¹

After five days of heavy fighting, Westmoreland had rooted out the enemy from most of the cities it had occupied. At this point, he indulged in a guarded optimism—an optimism that was to characterize all of his subsequent messages to Washington. On February 4, in a message to Wheeler, Westmoreland stated that the "enemy has failed in his objectives and has not been able to sustain his attacks. Thus, he has demonstrated the lack of a basic capability to do so." Westmoreland indicated that he considered the greatest threat existed in I Corps—the northern provinces—where he accorded the enemy the highest priority. In accordance with this estimate, he informed