INFEASIBLE AIMS AND THE POLITICS OF STALEMATE

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INFEASIBLE GOALS AND VIOLENT STALEMATE

The general is of a Western army whose cause was defeated by Asian communists: a decade and a half ago. The same Asian communists that are defeating U.S. aims in the same country, in a war the American has just left behind him. So the American listens curiously.

The general is French, therefore speaks in aphorisms: and thinks in straight lines, that sometimes take right-angle turns. A listener who misses a couple of these finds the general has come up behind him.

"In 1950, de Lattre de Tassigny asked me to go with him to Indochina as his deputy. I refused. He asked me what I thought of his assignment. I said: "Mon général, you should not go there. You will lose your reputation there, and you will lose your health."

"And?"

"He went. I went with him. He did not lose his reputation there; but he died."

So the general is an officer who tells unwelcome truths to his superior; one who can imagine and foretell a lost war. Rare qualities, no more appreciated, surely, in the French Army than in the American. ("Oh no, my views were not popular among the staff" the general says.) But how so wise? What had informed him?

"But I was there in 1947. At first, of course, I did not see it; but before long, before 1950, I saw that it was too late for us. The Vietnamese we might have allied with, to rally the people and confront the communists, were dead by then. The communist apparatus had grown too large, it penetrated too deeply... It was no longer to be defeated by us."

"When, then, was your last chance? When did it become too late?"

"1947. At the latest. Perhaps 1946."

1946: It was the end of that year the French began fighting. They fought for seven more years.

Now the American thinks of his war, the Americans' war, that started -- depending how you counted -- four or five years, or a decade, later.

"Then what year did it become too late, if it ever did, for the Americans?"

"1947."

Very funny.

But what, exactly, could that mean? Could it be right?

In 1961, even in 1965, most American officials, I included, would have known how to interpret that remark, that is, how to dismiss it. It would have meant, to us: another Frenchman, telling us that what the French couldn't do, the Americans could hardly do. It meant, don't try: because you might show us up, might show that our failure was not inevitable for Westerners, that it really flowed -- as Americans believed -- from the taints of colonialism and bad faith, from racism, from weakness, a rigid, ill-adapted army with a history of failure, an inadequate air force and a divided public: from all of which, Americans were sure, we were free. And it meant: since you will try anyway, allow us the pleasure, to ease our own defeat, of having told yours in advance.

Thus no use, we thought, to listen closely to a Frenchman, to look closely at what, exactly, the French had done, and what had happened to France in its war in Tonkin. The differences were too great; analogies were irrelevant or mischievous, likewise French advice. So, in 1961, and 1965.

But in 1968, the proposition demands more attention: even from a Frenchman, especially a Frenchman who was evidently right not only in 1954 but in 1950. Eighteen years later it appeared that our differences from the French -- though real, no doubt, or some of them (some not) -- had not, after all, made that much difference

To return, then, to the questions that his answers pose: What might it mean, to say that U.S. aims, like French, were simply not to be achieved after 1947; what is the evidence for such a judgment, what are its implications; could it be true?

U.S. AIMS AND FEASIBILITY

First, one must be clear what aims are in question. One recurrent short-run goal, after all -- the salient U.S. aim in crisis after crisis, in 1950, '54, '61, '63, '65, '68 -- we attained without fail: preventing the imminent takeover by communists of all of Vietnam. Though the

cost of success kept rising, it was never "too late" to achieve this: not even after Dienbienphu; not even after the downfall of Diem or the Tet offensive.

But it was never our intent to keep paying the price of such short-run successes indefinitely. In particular, it never fitted our ambitions or our sense of U.S. interests to maintain forever in Vietnam for this defensive purpose U.S. forces of the scale even of 1963, let alone 1967. Our long-run aim was to achieve the permanent effect, blocking communist control of all Vietnam, without the need of such crisis efforts or U.S. involvement. As President Eisenhower put it, positively, in his letter to Diem in 1954: to achieve "a strong, viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or aggression through military means." Yet that is still not specific enough: it could be pursued by several, conflicting approaches.

The one we chose (or backed, in the hands of successive Vietnamese regimes) had as a central aim the permanent exclusion of the Communist Party of Indochina from open politics, and ultimately, its total destruction as an organization. (After 1954, these applied only to its operation and existence in South Vietnam.)

This, then, was the underlying operational meaning, in terms of official, United States Government objectives, of a "win", in questions like (the title of a book by Herman Kahn): "Can we win in Vietnam?" It meant a Malayan-type, a Philippine-type victory. It meant a destruction of the Communist Party, near-total attrition of leaders and followers, almost all of them dead or deserted, deflected or fled, weapons turned in or buried; a formal surrender or tacit, complete "fade-away" to the level of petty banditry. To this end the U.S. devoted sizeable and ever-growing resources of money, materiel, expertise and manpower, for twenty years: without, ever, any measurable degree of success. It is of this end one asks: was it ever feasible?

Never. No real chance: not in 1969, or '65, or '61, or '54, or '50. Not for the French, not for us as we were, and are, or as we might realistically have been, not for the GVN's, any of them, and not for anyone else, either. That is one answer. It is the one I am tempted to give.

Impossible? Could it, truly, have been impossible for the U.S. to achieve its goal in Vietnam? The thought is both comforting and chilling.

In face of failure, it can be reassuring to those -- like me -- who feel themselves to have participated in that failure, to believe that no one could have succeeded; and that none of the actions not tried, neither those one rejected nor those one recommended in vain, would have worked, either. It is tempting, after all, to take shelter in what we used to think of as the French syndrome, post-1954.

But against this is the pain of believing that one's own, and the country's, effort, was wasted, hopeless, from the start: pain, above all, for those who themselves hoped foolishly, who failed to see the impossibility of the task, who on the contrary urged their government to undertake it, to stake the nation's prestige and its young men's lives, and then, to keep trying, to invest more, to press on harder... pain, scarcely less, for the mass of those who failed to warn or actively to fight the drift. For many men died, because of that. And we killed many, and wounded a society. And bad things happened to our own country. No, the thought that failure was foredoomed cannot, after all, be satisfying to any American.

It could nevertheless be true. And if true, important. If a task is infeasible, and one fails to see this or even to imagine it, efforts to learn from past failures may only lead badly astray. It could be that what is, most importantly, to be learned, is not "this method won't work" or "what to try next time," but how to foresee and recognize an impossible task, so as to avoid it or back out from it, or to set better, attainable goals. That means learning the dimensions of the problem that determine feasibility; it means taking a more complex view of our various interests and possible aims; it means learning the critical limits on our own capabilities. These are questions one may not come to ask while still involved singlemindedly in trying to square the circle.

Thus, to say that the eradication of the Communist Party, either in all of Vietnam or in the South alone, was strictly unattainable by

the U.S. and GVN after, say, 1947, is to say that for most of a generation U.S. policy aimed at the longer run was in pursuit of a chimera.

It would mean that our programs and policies looking toward the future were chosen and fashioned for a task they could not possibly perform. It says that promises of advantage in this crucial respect, that led to the selection of some policies and the rejection of others, were simply illusions in every case. It would not, then, be surprising that our programs were inappropriate and inefficient, unnecessarily costly (immensely so) if not ineffective or counterproductive, with respect to other, more feasible goals, including the defensive one of forestalling complete communist takeover. Indeed, except for the latter one, those other, potential objectives discussed below were scarcely considered as criteria. They simply were not "aims." They were approached, if at all, by chance: and seldom.

A judgment of "impossibility" would explain much else, besides, and in ways that I think are about right. Yet others would disagree: and to enter debate with them on this precise ground would foreclose a useful conclusion.

For obsessive interest in just this plaguing question -- "Was it impossible; was there a chance?" -- leads to another dead end. There is just no way to answer it conclusively. There is no mode of proof, or anything close to one. The situation is too complex, and our general understanding of the phenomena and the systems is far too rudimentary to advance "theorems of impossibility" with any basis for conviction.

So the question becomes rhetorical, contentless. In the end, a believer in the effort can always argue, convincingly, that "impossibility" has not been <u>proved</u>, which leaves: possibility. Not probability, large or small, not an estimate of costs and risks and time, nothing relevant to decision except: non-impossibility.

Advocates of commitment or escalation ask no larger opening; through that crack they have pushed their policies in nearly every crisis point of the last two decades. Thus, for example, the dialectic,

and the conclusion, in Kahn's "Can We Win in Vietnam?" Kahn's answer to the title question is "Maybe"; his reasoning, the absense of conclusive proof to the contrary;* his policy inference: "Try." In Kahn's argument, as frequently within the government, "possibility" of success is a sufficient reason for pressing ahead with current efforts, for the alternative of accepting defeat is seen to be so gravely ominous -- or as many key policy papers have put it, "intolerable" -- one need not ask the probability of success, or cost, or risk, or cost of failure. As I shall discuss elsewhere, the risk of forestalling these important questions being raised or answered in the decision process is strong reason to be wary of labelling undesired outcomes strictly "intolerable," "unacceptable," or "disastrous" however compelling those terms may seem. The same argument warns against too quickly characterising aims as "unattainable, infeasible, impossible." It is not that such a judgment is meaningless, nor that evidence and reasoning cannot be brought to bear on it, nor that it is not highly relevant to policy; just that in matters of uncertainty and controversy, it answers certain questions dramatically and conveniently but at the cost of cutting off too many others. So I will try to eschew this characterization myself, even when, as in this context, I find it most plausible and cogent.

There is an alternative formulation, one that follows from different questions from the dichotomizing of "possible or impossible," indeed, the very questions the latter structuring leads to ignoring: "What are the odds of achieving this aim by a given approach, or by conceivable alternatives? What are the odds of doing this within a given time, for given cost, or within 'acceptable' margins of cost and time, by U.S. agencies as they now exist: or would the latter need to

*Summarizing the views of his symposium participants in Can We Win In Vietnam? (New York, 1968, p. 13), Kahn concludes:

> "On this central issue -- 'Can we win?' -- we all take seriously the analysis made by some North Vietnamese, the NLF, and at one time the U.S. Government: i.e., the U.S. effort involves basic contradictions, and increased military efforts may be self-defeating. However, while Pfaff and Stillman argue that the case for this point of view

change their habits, personnel, structure, orientation? What are the costs, the risks? How and why are various approaches likely to fail, if they do; what are the likely, or possible, consequences of failure? Is the problem easy, very difficult, or neither?"

None of the conclusions that seem to me to be valid and important to draw about our long-run aim in Vietnam (including those posed tentatively above) rest critically upon a judgment that the aim was strictly unattainable. They follow with almost as much force from the judgment that the "problem" posed by this goal in the prevailing circumstances was not, perhaps, insoluble, but highly unlikely to be solved: by the U. S. Government, in company with the GVN, at acceptable cost and time.

Let me give, then, a different answer (argued below) to the question of "feasibility" raised earlier. The methods we used, as we used them, were almost sure to fail to eliminate the communist organization in the conditions of Vietnam after 1947, still more after '54 or '60. Other methods proposed, used successfully elsewhere by others against other opponents, would probably -- as actually carried out by us, against the VC -- have had little more success at this. Changes in the character or performance of U.S. or the GVN (or the VC) that might radically have improved the implementation of such approaches or brought them close to success, would have been difficult to bring about and were most unlikely to occur. U.S./GVN success at this chosen task may not have been impossible. But it was a very bad bet.

> is clear and certain, the other three authors, although willing to believe that -- in principle -- these 'contradictions by themselves might be enough eventually to cause a U.S. defeat in Vietnam, continue to question the seriousness and unmitigable nature of the contradictions. Thus we question their general assumption that it is virtually impossible for a foreign army to legitimize a weak and narrowly based government that is experiencing a revolutionary challenge."

Later Kahn challenges his in-house pessimists:

> "What bothers me -- and let me just throw this out to Pfaff and Stillman -- is just how you two can be almost certain

Sometimes there are no good bets. In fact, that would be a fair appreciation of our choices in Vietnam. Yet even though our intelligence appraisals often recognized this state of affairs realistically, our operational estimates and plans almost never seemed to take seriously, I would say, just how bad this particular gamble might be.

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that you know the outcome." (Can We Win in Vietnam?, p. 347) In the same spirit of the approach advanced below, Pfaff replies:

> "One never is sure. But you can read evidence"; and Stillman (p. 349): "It seems to me that to make a gloomy prognosis ... is not very daring at all. You began by asking how we could be so sure. We are not sure; we are merely dealing in terms of probability. But I would say that on the basis of the record of the last fourteen years, ours is a quite reasonable diagnosis."

ANTI-COMMUNIST POLICY AND THE LIKELIHOOD OF WAR

At the same time, the question of how likely, all things considered, our efforts were to fail was a particularly cogent one. For the total eradication of the Communist Party in South Vietnam was not an aim likely to "fail well." That is, an effort that fell short was not likely to serve lesser objectives: such as the containment and erosion, to a minority role, of communist influence; or the permanent avoidance, at sustainable cost, of total communist dominance and control; or, a phasing-down of U.S. responsibility and involvement.

On the contrary, the effort to minimize short-run risks of a communist takeover and, subject only to that, to maximize (mainly illusory) prospects of eventual extirpation of the communists, tempted the GVN to adopt certain policies and neglect others in a pattern that was actually counter-productive with respect to other potential, realistic aims. It led to a strictly repressive approach, applied (almost inevitably, by a government like the GVN in the circumstances of Vietnam) in a clumsy, undiscriminating way that was not merely helpful but perhaps <u>essential</u> -- after the lulling hiatus of 1954-58, and the lack of the French opponent -- to the large-scale growth of guerilla support and the alienation of potential government allies.

In practice, a policy of "rooting out" violently the communists and meanwhile excluding them systematically from open political participation did avoid a possible "cheap, quick win" by the communists in the short run, by election or subversion; and it did so fairly cheaply at first (1954-60) and with only moderate U.S. involvement as late as 1965. But it provided ideal growing weather for a resurgent guerilla apparatus capable of major military challenge -- near victorious, by 1964 -- and for a political machine that posed a growing, not a weakening, threat in any ultimate political contest. Yet meanwhile, measures -- difficult, risky (in short-run military or political terms) and unpleasant -- to prepare and strengthen the government and non-communist forces for a long-term political competition with communists did not seem urgent, in context of a policy designed to provide the Government eventually with a "communist-free environment."

But, as I will argue, that environment was just not likely to come about, ever. Still less was it likely to come about "peacefully", through quasi-civil processes, with the general approach we backed. Thus from the very beginnings of the Republic of Vietnam in 1954, a new Indochina War was likely. The ingredients were: (1) refusal by both the U.S. and the GVN to associate themselves with the Geneva Accords calling for a peaceful settlement of the unification issue by elections in 1956; (2) U.S. determination to do all it could (perhaps short of U.S. combat force) to prevent the further extension of communist government within Vietnam; (3) U.S. inclination to back (though initially, with reservations) a man strongly oriented to a policy of uncompromising repression of the communists; (4) dedication of the DRV leadership to the goals of unification and communization of all Vietnam by peaceful means if possible, but by violent means if necessary; (5) a communist capacity at any point after 1954 for launching within a short time (6-18 months) a sizeable guerilla insurgency.

The latter capacity was based upon: (a) a tested, disciplined Viet Minh organization, left behind in 1954; (b) a large pool of Southern "regroupees," available in the North for training and infiltration; (c) support from the DRV; (d) sizeable popular sympathy from the pre-1954 period (down from perhaps 80% to perhaps 25% of the population -- still sizeable -- by 1956; (e) highly experienced and dedicated top leadership, safe from destruction in the DRV, with a pool of experienced high-level leaders (along with lower cadres) to replace any destroyed in the South; and (f) close access to border sanctuaries, for leaders, headquarters and units under pressure.

The origins of these strengths all dated earlier than 1954. They are implicit in the alternative dates that Vu Van Thai suggests (agreein in spirit with the estimate of André Beaufre, the French general quoted earlier) as marking, more and more definitively, when it became "too late" to extirpate the communist organization from Vietnam:

> "1. After the August 1945 Bao Dai surrender of authority to Ho and the Viet Minh, leaving the Viet Minh holding Hanoi.

or 2. By December 1946, when destruction of other nationalist groups had been completed and fighting broke out -- bringing hostilities vs. French under communist banner.

or 3. Late 1949: the coming of Chinese communists to the border of Vietnam. (At that point, the French fight becomes Sisyphean.)

4. After 1954: the Viet Minh apparatus in the South had a heritage of prestige from victory over the French, tested cadre, and existence of an international base (NVN) to provide training, know-how, finance, leadership.

After 1954, elements of survival in the South were definitive (unlike Malaya): abundance of food in the Delta, potential helpers all around (not just in the cities like the Chinese population in Malaya), border and cross-border sanctuaries, help from NVN, pool of regroupees, cadre almost uniquely well-guided and experienced in clandestine organization." [D-19127, p. 6]

Given these factors, and realistic (even optimistic) limits on GVN administrative, military, and police efficiency, this communist capability for guerrilla operations could not be destroyed by GVN pressures short of an internal war (or probably even then, or even with an "optimal" process of political development). Or, to follow our preferred formulation: it was most unlikely to be destroyed; the task of doing so would have been of the highest order of difficulty.

That capability for armed resistance persisting, it was almost sure to be triggered into overt internal war if it were seriously challenged -- or the personal security of members of the apparatus endangered -- by military/police pressures from the Diem regime, which was probable, from '56 on.

War, then, was probable. It was not a war the communists were likely to lose, in the sense either of their destruction or their permanent acceptance of exclusion from politics. Yet it was not -- it seems to me -- one they were certain to <u>win</u>, in the sense of

achieving an overwhelmingly dominant role in the politics of South Vietnam. The chance of that outcome depended on policies other than the broad aim of communist-suppression that Diem was to follow: and these were neither thoroughly foreseeable nor, perhaps, predetermined in 1954.

Nevertheless, the more one knew of Diem -- and some Vietnamese arrived at a pretty clear impression, in meetings in 1954 -- the more one could have foreseen the course he actually did choose. He was to follow his true instincts and nature, and the U.S. was content to let him: this despite the fact that to back a narrow based, anti-communist government in South Vietnam in 1956 would seem long-odds, risky policy. Even more, to put U.S. prestige on the outcome, and on the regime. The result seems obviously a policy with high probability and prospective cost of failure. Yet we did so, not "inadvertently," but for considered reasons that led to similar policy both earlier (1950-54) and later (1964-67), each time after considerable internal calculation and debate.

We thought we needed to destroy communist organization and exclude communists from politics; to rule out coalition with communists, or even overt participation of communists in politics, or even GVN failure to use maximum pressure against communist conspiracy; all this to avoid out-and-out communist domination of South Vietnam. We regarded underdevelopment and factionalism of the non-communist groups as immutable within the decade. And communist domination of South Vietnam by any means spelled probable communist domination of all Southeast Asia, with "intolerable" consequences for U.S. prestige, influence and allies.

Hence, the only chance of avoiding great loss was to exclude communist participation, and pursue communist organization to its destruction or neutralization. This required:

(a) Anti-Communist government (one inclined to exclude communism and hence, to exclude those non-communist elements that might be inclined to deal with communism).

(b) "Strong" government (decisive, disciplined, coordinated, capable of preventing "chaos" in the South, providing strong leadership for military-police measures).

Both required, in the condition of Vietnam in 1954, narrow-based government; and the only available leader that fit both requirements was one inclined to antagonize other non-communist elements; to repress all opposition, eschew legality, harass the population; and to rely on family rule, exacerbating administrative weaknesses. Moreover -- as was likely though less inevitable -- he chose to show preference to, and rely heavily on, Catholics, non-Southerners, and former servants of the French and Bao Dai regimes (rather than of the liberation struggle).

Little weight was given (with a few exceptions) to the possibility that a broad-based non-communist government -- though less decisive, with more internal conflict, and more tolerant of communist existence and quasi-legal activities -- might:

(a) draw greater public support and create a more difficult environment for communist violent tactics or recruiting; especially, that it might
(b) deprive communists of allies;
(c) be better able to enlist organizations (e.g., the Sects, the unions) as allies and mobilize population;
(d) recruit more talent into the GVN, providing ultimately better administration;
(e) with less insecurity from non-communist opposition, have better allowed administrative and military reform.

Such a government might have had a much better chance of containing or even suppressing communist revolutionary violence, and of keeping the communist organizations politically subordinate, even though (in part, because) it did not attempt to suppress communist organizations entirely. The latter attempt (almost surely unsuccessful) was likely to be made in South Vietnam only by a regime, and in a manner, that could not succeed in any of the above respects.

Meanwhile, the Viet Cong were unquestionably capable of gaining enough support from the rural population to grow to a large-scale military threat, one that could be prevented from victory only at great cost, and ultimately only with a sizeable number of U.S. troops: unless the mass of the population could be at least prevented (before 1958) from developing an antipathy to the GVN counterbalancing, or outweighing any antipathy to the Viet Cong. Or unless after 1957-58, this growing trend to a "double allergy" could be reversed, creating a balance of sympathies against the Viet Cong, even if the masses were not won to strong support of the GVN or turned strongly against the Viet Cong. So much was essential, to increase critically the costs, effort and risks of Viet Cong operation and growth, and reduce those of the GVN to sustainable levels.

To stress this last consideration is to say that the current high cost of containing the communists may not have been inevitable, even though it was likely. In contrast to efforts to eradicate the communist organization, which were virtually sure to fail, efforts to contain its growth and influence far short of a major threat of military takeover of political dominance, at a cost sustainable indefinitely by the GVN and the U.S. were probably not hopeless, and indeed, may still not be. (It is even possible that the odds for this -- given appropriate policy -- are as high as they ever were, perhaps as high as 50% (Thai's guess), though the short-term costs have grown inescapably high.) But to achieve this end depended then -- and now -- not only upon radical improvements in administration, military and police efforts but upon the attitudes of the population toward the Viet Cong and the GVN: in particular, to the degree people were or could be "mobilized" and guided by effective leaders within non-communist organizations.

It was never likely that the GVN could directly organize the population to this effect. "Spontaneous" organization by local or factional leaders of religious, labor, student or regional groups provided far greater promise of effectiveness. Critical issues, then, were whether the GVN would permit and encourage the emergence of effective leadership and the growth of organizations capable of attracting

popular participation and resisting communist dominance; whether it would permit and encourage the emergence of effective leadership and the growth of organizations capable of attracting popular participation and resisting communist dominance; whether it would permit and encourage the coalescence of these factions in the face of the communist threat; and whether it would in its own operations refrain from alienating, by its policies and by the actual behavior of its civil and military representatives, large numbers of individuals and groups in both countryside and cities.

In fact, it did none of these. Nor did the U.S. ever focus its influence to any of these ends. Just the contrary. Diem used the same tactics, after the onset of the open insurgency, that he had used earlier and that the French had used for a hundred years: excluding most organized groups from effective participation in national administration and restricting even this local influence; and encouraging inter-group and intra-faction division and conflict, rather than cohesion, in order to divide-and-rule. These tactics had worked effectively to suppress non-communist threats to French, and then to Diem's, preeminence. They were not effective against an expertly-led, highly motivated communist organization of national scope. Nor were they appropriate in creating an environment of support for the Government and resistance to the Viet Cong suitable for confronting a communist threat; either for the French, or for Diem, or for his successors.

What made the communist challenge so formidable was not that they enjoyed the willing support of the majority of the population in South Vietnam (in contrast to Tonkin, in the war against the French); they almost surely did not. It was enough to make the task of containing and reducing their influence, let alone suppressing them, highly difficult and problematic, that they had the amount of willing support (appropriately located in the countryside) they did enjoy, whether that was 25% or 10% of the total population. For the GVN, facing such a threat, to multiply its internal enemies, or to forego potential allies and support, amounted to recklessness. Worse than

that: it meant that a significant part of the resources that were available to the Government had to be devoted (e.g., military units and police intelligence) to watching and countering threats other than communists'. And it meant that Diem was so dependent on a narrow base of support, particularly the army, that he could not afford to take measures to improve its effectiveness, e.g., making appointments on grounds of professionalism rather than personal loyalties, lest he increase ARVN's will or ability to overthrow him. For the U.S., in effect, to oppose a sizeable communist-led faction by backing one other minority faction, one heedless of support and careless of incurring the hostility of other elements, was not a promising policy.

The relevance of non-communist political support or opposition was not limited to the countryside. Any threat to or vulnerability of the regime, wherever located -- e.g., in the cities, in the U.S., or within the GVN structure itself -- that distracted GVN attention or resources from the struggle with the communists, contributed directly to the intractability of the specific communist challenge in the countryside. The mere absence of willing, active support of the regime, or rather, its thinness, even in the cities, constituted such a vulnerability. It meant that any significant non-communist (or communist-inspired) opposition that did arise (like the "militant Buddhist" opposition in 1963 from organizational origins perhaps no earlier than 1961) would find the GVN naked of allies, except for the Army and the U.S., so that the regime would be more dependent than ever on the loyalty and the capabilities of these two elements. In 1963, neither proved reliable and the regime collapsed.

But even before 1963, and for later regimes, it was evident that no one else could be counted on to oppose or to help the regime in countering a sharp challenge, even from a small minority: which might for its part, quickly find allies in opposing the government. Hence the need for alertness to any such challenge, and the growing tendency to rely on early repression. Thus the orientation and deployment of the police force and Special Branch Intelligence (and such units as the Vietnamese Special Forces) were designed mainly against non-communist

threats in the cities: with a resulting weakness in the countryside, and lack of focus, to this day, on the communist apparatus.

We had placed high emphasis in internal analyses (little in actions or pressure) on political issues and nationalism in the First Indochina War. After 1954, we tended to think (mistakenly) the issue of nationalism had disappeared. And after 1956, though we still saw political problems, except at critical moments (as in the fall of 1960, or the summer of 1963) they appeared secondary. Especially after 1961, as our enlarged military establishment in South Vietnam swamped perceptions by some civilians of the importance of politics.

Meanwhile, Diem had learned by his experiences in his first years in power:

-- to trust his own judgment, versus U.S. advice;

-- the U.S. government would not compel its wishes; would support his success (even if he went against advice)·

-- U.S. leverage was low (as in dealing with French) because U.S. prestige was committed to success (wouldn't take a risk of loss), yet the U.S. was reluctant to take full command and responsibility, or commit U.S. troops;

-- Direct confrontation with the U.S. or other opponents was better than compromise, or alliance.

All this lowered our leverage on Diem. Between 1958 and 1961 the U.S. did, through Ambassador Durbrow, "urge" Diem to build a broader political base, rather than to guard the narrow one he had exclusively by measures of subversion, exclusion and repression of other factions. The U.S. approach was ineffective (perhaps, as its critics claimed, counterproductive), in part because it was less than halfhearted. There was never a confident sense on the U.S. side of <u>why</u>, or how important it was, Diem should follow political tactics that went so against his instincts. He had, after all, been successful -- to our surprise, and far beyond our hopes -- on the basis of his own style, in containing the initial non-communist challenges to his rule. The main reason most American officials could understand for using different politics in confronting the communist resurgence was for U.S. public relations purposes, in reassuring the American public that we were not supporting a narrow dictatorship, and this aim, desirable

as it was, did not seem important enough to compromise our joint effort against the communists within Vietnam, or even Diem's sense of assurance (or willingness to accept our military and technical advice) in combatting them.

In 1954 we still, as in 1950, saw as "necessary" a government capable of winning the active loyalty and support of the local population in the South. We saw some but not all of the limitations of a Diem-type regime in winning such loyalty. Diem's success in 1954-56 in suppressing organized challenges to his rule did not reflect either popular support or characteristics helpful in winning such support. On the contrary, the very means of Diem's early successes were adequate basis for predicting his later failure, his alienation of most groups, and weakness with respect to a non-communist overthrow. However, the success of these early efforts was a surprise, undermining confidence in other gloomy predictions (i.e., providing a foothold for wishfulness). At the same time (1956-57) the future communist threat -- and hence the need for widespread loyalty -- had, somewhat unaccountably, come to be deprecated. And when that mood changed (1960-61), it seemed too late either to change the regime, to repair its failings, or to change public attitudes. Meanwhile, U.S. policy-making influence had shifted to those who either thought peasant loyalty rather easily won by military, "civic action" and administrative measures (as in colonialist "pacification" in the 19th century); or tended to disregard it; or reluctantly abandoned pressures to achieve it,as conflicting with Diem's acceptance of higher-urgency measures.

We had been surprised by Diem's riding out the military challenge from the Sects and Army; but that in itself gave little basis for hope against the communists. He did not exhibit flexibility; yet a switch to different methods (including conciliation of the just-defeated Sects) was essential to fight communists. Above all, he needed allies: whereas he didn't against the Sects, which were more easily bribed and their leaders destroyed and against whose poorly-trained troops ARVN was adequate

Those who complain of the U.S. "moralizing" about Diem in 1958-63, probably approved Diem's "moralizing" about the Binh Xuyen and other Sects -- "corrupt, self-interested, depraved, venal, hypocritical, political..." on which basis he justified his refusal to conciliate them and his measures to divide and weaken them.

We applauded the destruction -- instead of requiring a coalition -- of the Sects, and took hope in the deterioration in strength and cohesiveness of Diem's non-communist opposition: which outweighed in numbers the Catholics, Army, and Northern refugees as the potential opposition to the communists!

But the Vietnamese were in a three-person (or more) non-zero-sum game. These moves meant a decrease in threat both to Diem and to the communists; and which would exploit this opportunity better in the long run? Thus, the Army was reduced as a threat to Diem, strengthened as Diem support, by emphasis on personal loyalty of officers, by frequent shifts in command and by dividing commands, at the cost of professionalism. By the same process, ARVN was reduced as a threat to the Viet Cong. As with the Sects: obstacles to Viet Cong growth were removed along with threats to Diem's control.

Thus, we virtually ignored what was probably the fastest and most effective possible measure to slow and contain the growth of the Viet Cong in the Delta; a changed policy toward the Sects. And we condoned a totally unnecessary exclusionist policy toward urban opposition, and the growth of rigid, autocratic, repressive practices and reflexes that led in two years to the destruction of the regime and a consequent "great leap forward" by the Viet Cong in the countryside.

THE LEGITIMACY OF COMMUNIST STRUGGLE

One argument, in the '50s and until recently, in favor of police pursuit of communists and their exclusion from politics is that failure to attack them would "give" them -- indeed, "make them a gift of" -- legitimacy, legality, so "giving away" a prime and effective GVN propaganda slogan. Yet, worry about the symbolic or practical effects of conferring legitimate status upon the Viet Cong or the Communist Party flies against history and reality. It ignores the fact that the legitimacy or right of the Party to exist and even to participate in power could hardly be in dispute in the eyes of the Vietnamese populace. It was not something to be "granted" or taken away by any act of the Diem Government or any later GVN, or the U.S. Not after formal recognition of the Party-dominated DRV as a government by Bao Dai (in 1945) and by the French (in 1945-46); not after eight years of leading the successful resistance against the French; not while it continued to be led by the leaders of the liberation, the most respected group of leaders in the country, headed by the national hero.

On the contrary, any regime that excluded this Party from political participation, harassed it and indiscriminately stigmatized its members as "criminals" and "traitors" could only gravely undermine its own legitimacy as a protector of law and order, of justice, and of Vietnamese aspirations. Moreover, to do this was to guarantee resistance; still further, totally to legitimize it. Whether or not an individual or group sympathized with the Communists' ultimate aims (by 1956, the majority probably did not), few Vietnamese would deny that by 1958 the Communists had been offered no alternative to armed resistance to maintain not only their organizational functioning but their own personal security. What more could be done to assure the legitimacy, along with inevitability, of this struggle?

This much could be seen even by those who approved, on balance, a repressive policy, or who would have done the same had they been in power. Yet neither they, nor the U.S., seem ever to have given

much thought to the consideration that an "unnecessary" struggle by communists against the procedures of a system of politics that was itself recognized generally as legitimate -- and GVN willingness to accept the peaceful participation of a communist-led faction, along with non-communist opposition, was virtually a prerequisite to that -- would not only have lacked legitimacy but would thereby be greatly reduced in effectiveness. Against a "just" regime, assassinations, threats and conspiracies would have had the color truly of offenses against law and order, of criminal acts, rather than of inescapable acts of resistance to injustice. Such a change could have affected not only the attitudes, acceptance and will to cooperate of the relatively uninvolved populace, but the morale of the insurgent fringes and, perhaps above all, of the government forces themselves, always -- in the absence of a just order to defend -- sensitive to challenge as unprincipled mercenaries.

The past provides little test, in fact, of how the legitimacy and effectiveness of further communist struggle might be affected if at last violent resistance could be made to appear unnecessary to their rights of participation and personal security. As it was, the Diem regime created a whole class of "oppressed" victims, of whom communists were a minority, but to whom the communists could offer themselves as leaders and protectors.

For its part, the U.S. chose to back those elements in Vietnamese society who shared our view of the only acceptable long-run goal -- the eradication of communist organization and influence from Vietnam. This government based only on "anti-communists" was not one that could, in fact, survive in open competition with the communists. Nor was it one that could mobilize wide popular participation to contain and combat terrorism and insurrection by communists; only a "non-communist,"not an "anti-communist" government might do that in Vietnam.

The anti-communists in Vietnam were:

-- too few;

-- not competent, honest, disciplined, flexible enough;

-- not capable of organizing masses;
-- not inclined to seek, or capable of winning, allegiance from other groups.

So long as governments we supported ignored, or suppressed, other organized non-communists, one could only be pessimistic about direct competition between the GVN and Viet Cong. This left the possibility -- upon which we focussed, without estimating its (very low) likelihood -- of GVN success in its aim of excluding the communists from such competition, and ultimately, eradicating them. We did not ask in detail how this policy would look if it failed, but in a sense we did not need to; it was evident from the considerations above that if it failed, it would fail badly.

Yet not only the prudency of policy, but something more than that in terms of espoused ideals of the U.S., is called into question when the U.S. intervenes, first in support of a colonialist war, then in support of a narrow-based, repressive dictatorship, with the aim of suppressing a minority of the population with the size and the historic and organizational credentials of the Viet Minh.

After the eight-year war against the French, to back exclusively a rigidly anti-communist policy or regime in Vietnam (as distinct from one strongly competitive to communist efforts) seems as implausible, as questionable in terms of legitimacy or justice, as it would in France or Italy. And as imprudent.

To focus on the last point, it was at least as "bold" for an anti-communist government to launch a campaign of repression and imprisonment against communists in South Vietnam as it would have been, after the Second World War, or would be now, in France or Italy. To do so, as Diem did, without assuring or even seeking, the strongest possible alliance with other non-communist forces in the society, was no less than recklessness. But to pursue the communists while simultaneously, by exclusion, neglect and generalized repression, multiplying enemies and alienating most potential allies: this was recklessness squared.

Yet it was just when this fatal pattern became obvious and probably irrevocable -- by 1959-61 -- that the U.S. commenced to increase its investment of U.S. prestige in anti-communist success; just as it had in 1950, choosing to join the fight against the Viet Minh immediately after the Chinese communists had linked borders to the insurgency and made its defeat, or even the avoidance of its total success in Tonkin, close to infeasible.

Given unstinting U.S. support, even this egregious political policy did not assure a defeat for the GVN: so long as the VC political policy was almost equally short-sighted, or reckless, in narrowing communist appeal and backing. It did assure a costly and indecisive struggle.

As an imaginable alternative, the GVN (and U.S.) might have aspired to deterring or suppressing utterly criminal acts of communists, or even the communist organization if it could be made generally to appear criminal; but the latter stigmatization could not be achieved simply by declaring it criminal, especially by the Diem regime. The origins and nature of the Viet Minh/Viet Cong were nothing like those of the urban gangster machine, the Binh Xuyen. Use of "revolutionary violence," even terrorism, does not equate the Viet Cong to the Mafia (despite the fondness of the U.S. Administration for this parallel, to be found not only in the memos of Walt Rostow but, among other places, in speeches I drafted in 1964-65), any more than it did the Irish Republicans, or the Israeli Irgun, or the Fedayeen, or the Cypriot, Algerian or Kenyan terrorists.

The "criminal" label could only be attached in a context where they had the right to organize peacefully in political opposition, even free from unfair harassment, and nevertheless relied on violent coercion. Then, perhaps, even the communists in Vietnam could not have drawn enough support from the public to persist profitably in large-scale violence. Otherwise, if they were allowed, along with their other strengths and advantages, the martyr role of rebels against a regime that unjustly persecuted and excluded them, they were not to be destroyed: nor was the violence to be curtailed.

ANTI-COMMUNIST AIMS AND THE LIKELIHOOD OF COSTLY STALEMATE

It is, I believe, misleading to see the persistence of the Communist Party in South Vietnam as caused by either failings of omission by the GVN and the United States -- "if only they had done X...or done it sooner, or bigger..." -- or errors of commission -- "if only they had not done Y...or if they had not done Z so poorly..."

It follows from all the preceding discussion that this state of affairs, the survival in some significant scale of the Communist Party organization with North Vietnam support, was simply not very sensitive to policies or actions within the scope of the GVN, even with the fullest support of the United States, and especially within the range of military or purely repressive policy. That is what is meant by saying that the eradication of the Party, after 1954 (or perhaps, after 1945-1946) was maximally difficult, highly unlikely, or close to "impossible." It means that to believe otherwise runs the risk of drawing wrong "lessons," both as to what might "work," elsewhere or in the future, and what would not work. At the same time, other aspects of the actual or potential situation -- including costs of the effort, its ongoing effectiveness, and the final outcome in terms of communist influence in South Vietnam -- were, I believe, highly sensitive to GVN/U.S. policy: more sensitive, and over a wider range of feasible outcomes, I suspect, than most people imagine, even those Americans close to the problem. This is not to say that either GVN or U.S. policy was very flexible and could easily have been changed, or brought to be other than it was. Such change, I would guess, would have been at best difficult and chancy to bring about, and perhaps unstable once achieved. Actual policies and practices were not, doubtless, absolutely fated; but they seem to me to have been in most cases the "natural," the easiest and most likely course for these structures to follow, as events evolved. Yet to the extent that GVN/U.S. policy could have been different, or could still change or evolve -- in particular, with respect to Vietnamese politics -- I believe it could still make a very strong difference.

This is very far from either a fatalistic or even a pessimistic outlook, even about the final outcome. Though I am extremely dubious that the total victory we have generally sought was ever really attainable, I have come to put far more weight than any but a small group of observers (mostly Vietnamese), though still tentatively, on the possibility of outcomes other than total communist domination of the government, politics and society of South Vietnam. These would be intermediate outcomes, in other words, involving some measure of compromise (from past communist aims), and of "coexistence" of communists with non-communist structures, groups, interests, traditions.

In contrast, nearly all U.S. opinion, inside and outside the U.S. Government, has accepted the view tacitly or explicitly that no state of affairs between total communist domination and total eradication of communists as an organized body could be even moderately stable or peaceful, without a major continued U.S. presence. It is this view that is the more fatalistic, if one rules out or abandons the aim of achieving the total elimination of communism from South Vietnam. At the same time, this view has some tendency to be self-confirming, for it supports policies repressing and weakening just those non-communist factions, "oppositionist" from the point of view of the GVNs we have backed, on whom a strong compromise solution would depend.

In any event, we did not pursue such a compromise. I shall consider elsewhere the complex and uncertain issues that bear on what might have happened if we had, and what the most promising approaches might have been. (I do not simply assume, or assert, that such an aim of "containment" and "coexistence" is or would have been in any sense less "ambitious" in terms of feasibility, less difficult or contingent, than the anti-communist goal we set ourselves.)

Given the aims we did choose, the successive stages of U.S. involvement that actually occurred each followed, I would say, not quite inexorably but with considerably high likelihood. To summarize

the preceding argument: Given our view of U.S. interests and available paths to protecting them, U.S. backing for a strictly anti-communist policy in Vietnam was likely, hence also our support for Diem or for a closely similar regime. Given the repressive policies of such a regime, as they were likely to be implemented, and given conditions in Vietnam and the historic strengths of the VC, the result was not likely to be the successful, "peaceful" attrition of communist organization, but rather the growth of communist strength and the outbreak of internal war.

It was furthermore likely (though less strongly so, it seems to me, than earlier or later steps in this sequence) that the performance of both sides -- one increasingly directed and supported by Hanoi; the other by Washington -- would be such as to tilt the balance in this overt conflict gradually against the GVN, making U.S. support (and eventually combat involvement) increasingly necessary to its survival. But U.S. views and practices, as they evolved, made that increased involvement likely, if and when it became needed. From 1961 on, it was needed, and forthcoming.

To take the argument now one step further, I believe that, given a certain minimal U.S. presence, the fundamental dynamics of the war have moved it towards stalemate (furthermore, stalemate at high cost to the United States, though the United States could -- if it could behave differently -- probably achieve the same results or better at much lower cost). That is, I believe that protracted, high-cost, indecisive conflict was highly probable, that it was well-determined, even over-determined, that changes in one or a few factors would not easily have changed this outcome.

That is to say that the mechanism of US/GVN/VC/DRV/Soviet/Chicom interaction has not "tended" to victory, gradual or quick, of the GVN, or of the VC (except as U.S. domestic tolerance of a U.S. presence is gradually undermined: which we promote by letting costs become and stay high). So long as a certain level of U.S. support persisted (less than our 1966-1969 levels) the outcome of the war was not likely

to be a victory for either side. And this followed, I believe, from some fundamental factors besides the obvious ones of U.S. resources and concern for its prestige (making it hard to defeat) and communist expertise and support in South and North Vietnam (likewise).

Despite U.S. resources and the minority status of the VC in South Vietnam, a breakthrough to victory was not, for mainly political reasons to be made by the GVN; but not, probably, by any other one group we might have backed, either.

Looking at the Governments we backed, the anti-communist factions supporting the GVN -- Catholics, Army officers, Northern refugees, businessmen, high civil servants -- do appear relatively strong on internal cohesion and on several other dimensions, compared to any one organization except the communists. Yet their strengths do not make up, in lone confrontation with the communists, for small numbers and other limitations. Nor does any other one group among the non-communists "deserve" exclusive Governmental power, nor have the combination of numbers, cohesion, and ability to be able to use it to dominate the communists effectively, without allies.

It is probably true, as Charles Wolf has pointed out (e.g., Asian Survey, March 29, p. 161) that the GVN, especially for the Diem era, does not compare badly -- in competence, honesty, perhaps even active support -- to most other countries of Southeast Asia. This pertinent: e.g., it warns us away from such "solutions" as simply "bringing the GVN up to the level of its neighbors" in these respects. But it is not an adequate or even the most relevant standard. First, there is the standard corresponding to "the demands of the situation," largely set by the communist challenge. Second, there are indications of what the society is capable of, in terms of organizational competence, drive, motivation: these, too, are provided largely by the VC and by North Vietnam, in a way generally unfavorable to the GVN. Finally, there are indications of concrete means by which the GVN could have increased its base of support (and its own internal cohesion and morale), ultimately with positive effects on its leadership

pool and its effectiveness. Most of these have been missed, year by year. Nor has U.S. pressure, applied with understanding and a sense of urgent priority, compensated (since it generally did not exist) for the predictable reluctance of the narrow group of power-holders in Saigon to share influence in pursuit of broad backing or "reform."

When similar evaluations are made of U.S. influence -- comparisons of what the U.S. Government has done to what was demanded, or to the efficiency of the opposition, or to apparent opportunities -- the same low marks emerge: even if the U.S. effort, like the GVN's, is not so bad compared to some parallel performances by others, e.g., by France in Indochina (or by the Russians in advising the Egyptians, prior to 1967).

In fact, when we look closely at the opposing efforts, the question becomes not, "Why haven't we won?" but "Why haven't we lost?"

Is the answer mainly the disparity in resources on the two sides? Would, then, France, with more U.S. money and firepower and helicopters, have won in Tonkin in 1954? Could it have avoided losing, indefinitely? What if France had had a British level of expertise (probably, in Malaya, superior to French or American) in the specific fields of police work, colonial administration, Special Branch intelligence, and anti-guerrilla tactics?

I would conjecture that the French would gradually have lost the war in Tonkin even with these advantages: and even if they had been joined by large numbers of U.S. troops. Yet even France, without these advantages, still did not lose in Cochinchina: militarily, politically, or diplomatically. Nor has the United States, or the GVN. (This reflects, I believe, important differences in the history, society, and politics of Tonkin and Cochinchina: whose import I will discuss elsewhere.) The costs of the effort have been very sensitive to the way we have fought war -- we could almost surely have achieved the same results at much lower cost -- but the results themselves may have been much less so.

I suspect the difference in the two wars is that the politics of the war in Tonkin did not lead toward stalemate, much less French victory, but toward French defeat, even if the French had been far richer and wiser; whereas the politics of the South, after 1956, have led toward stalemate (given certain minimal levels of external support to both sides) and would have even if the U.S. effort had been weaker and worse (or, bigger and better). Moreover, the Second War has tended, in a course hard to dislodge, to stalemate at ever-increasing levels of conflict, destruction, force levels and costs: i.e., to indecisive escalation, till one home front cracked: not likely to be Hanoi's.

FACTORS TOWARD STALEMATE

Backing an anti-communist strategy since 1956, we have been, in Vu Van Thai's phrase, "Fighting 20% of the population with 25%." (Thai's figures are rough, hence reversible.) This has led to a stalemate, with escalating costs, because:

(a) The Viet Cong are too large, well-rooted, resolute, etc. to be destroyed (see discussion above).

(b) GVN/ARVN capability and support are too large (given U.S. aid) to be destroyed without NVA opposition (contrary to Westmoreland's view in the spring of 1965), or given some U.S. combat support, even with NVA. (GVN/ARVN's will to fight might crack, but even this development, Tet 1968 indicates, may have been overestimated by all: the U.S., the VC/DRV, and the GVN itself.

(c) Neither side is capable of dominating the other, or even preventing the other's growth, without winning over a large part of the uncommitted, either from the unorganized or the organized non-communists.

(d) Neither side tried to or did win the uncommitted population -- either organized or unorganized -- to its cause. Each side, for example, has at varying times seriously and unnecessarily alienated the Sects, and the urban Buddhists. (Vu Van Thai believes that either could still win these, for dominance, despite the "double allergy" of the population to both sides as of now).

(e) The VC are capable (given their tactics and expertise, resolution, and scale of minority support) of making the costs very high of:

(1) trying to destroy them, or contain them sharply, or even of

(2) avoiding the sharp containment of the GVN. This is so especially given U.S./GVN inefficiency, and GVN failure to gain internal allies; but it would hold even if the U.S. had been, or became, far more efficient.

A more extended list of the factors in the situation leading to stalemate would include:

Opposing the VC/DRV:

1. "Double allergy" of the population, extending to the VC (especially after 1964) as well as to the GVN (latter allergy tempered by GVN inefficiency).

2. Strong anti-communist faction (comparable in size to communists); especially active and resolute on "terminal defense" -- when "up against the wall" -- not in "area defense" and/or "forward defense."

3. Failure of communists to adopt political strategy: to win Hao Hoa, Cao Dai, Buddhists, cities, students, labor.

4. RVNAF emphasis on, and effectiveness in, defense: especially given U.S. air/artillery support, and U.S. presence.

5. Resilience of Vietnamese population, under bombing, terrorism, refugee movement; and on the other hand, failure to collapse socially, or to hate the U.S. (despite impact of U.S. firepower) as generally or intensely as the French.

6. Enormity of U.S. (hence GVN) resources, compared to French or VC/DRV.

7. U.S. view of stakes, and escalation of commitment hence willingness to bear high costs.

8. U.S. combat support and combat troops, counterbalancing NVA (which, without U.S. presence, could probably have brought victory to the VC, anytime after the development, at the latest by 1964, of a guerilla/local force/infrastructure base adequate to support NVA operations).

Opposing the GVN/U.S.:

9. Hard-core VC support, and historic roots and prestige.

10. Willingness of Chinese and Soviets to supply DRV with war material, and to make good economic losses due to U.S. action.

11. Inability of air interdiction to stop the (small) flow of supplies or to impose unacceptable or infeasible costs on DRV.

12. DRV confidence in success, and will to continue, even at high cost, in order to:

    (a) avoid destruction of VC (at least);
    (b) achieve VC dominance (a Communist South Vietnam)?
    (c) unify Vietnam?

13. Presence of NVA, to distract and preoccupy U.S. forces (this determines more the high cost than the existence of the stalemate, which would probably exist even with U.S. forces present but no NVA).

14. Inefficiency of U.S. effort, leading to high costs of given combat effort: maintenance of conventional organization, use of conventional tactics, generous use of costly forms of firepower (e.g., B-52's).

15. Failure of GVN and U.S. to coordinate political intelligence or mount expert Special Branch/police-type efforts against the communist apparatus.

16. Failure to reform RVNAF/GVN or (to see urgent need for, or possibility of, or means to reform) or broaden political base.

In short, while it is obviously not easy, if it is possible at all, for anti-communists to win the internal war in the South, it may not be easy for them to lose it, either. (This could lead to something of a stalemate in negotiations, as in the war, even if the U.S. were inclined to be "soft"; to paraphrase a recent remark by Chuck Cooper, it may be hard to lose at the negotiating table what we have failed to lose on the battlefield.)

This conclusion, so far as it rests on the sorts of considerations listed above, is quite specific to South Vietnam. Points 1-3 above,

for example, are key political factors that apply peculiarly in South Vietnam, and particularly in the Mekong Delta and area around Saigon and applied in those areas, in contrast to the North, during the First Indochina War as well. They did not apply in Tonkin in the First War nor would they today. These differences are in turn probably related to the many other historical/cultural/sociological/political differences between Tonkin and Cochinchina (leaving Central Vietnam out of these comparisons).

Southern Vietnam is different from the North in many ways:

(a) settled much later by Vietnamese;
(b) less Chinese/Confucian/Mandarin influence, more Cambodian, animist, Sect (see D-19135, "Confucians and Communists" for some possible implications of this, in decreased susceptibility to communism);
(c) occupied first by the French;
(d) run as a colony;
(e) reoccupied first by the French;
(f) not run (like Hanoi and Tonkin) by the DRV, August 1945-December 1946;
(g) further from the Chicom border, or Tonkin bases;
(h) stronghold of the Sects;
(i) richer peasants (even though largely tenants);
(j) home after 1954 of 600,000 Northern Catholics, many other Northern refugees, the Bao Dai administration and ARVN.

It is my conjecture (to be discussed further in a later paper) that these differences, among others, have been related to differences in political attitudes in a way that has made South Vietnam far less susceptible than Tonkin to communist-led organization: and that this is reflected in the difference between Viet Minh control achieved in Tonkin in 1946-54 (almost total, except for the area immediately around Hanoi-Haiphong) and in Cochinchina, either in 1946-54 or 1959-69 (much the same "measles map" of conflicting control in both periods). As early as 1946-47, the French had lost the struggle for control of population

in Tonkin; they never did in Cochinchina.

I conclude that if we had put the current U.S. effort into Tonkin in 1954 (as some U.S. officials were ready to do) we would have met with far less success than in South Vietnam. If we had achieved a stalemate there at all, it would have been more costly, less promising or reliable, and probably on far worse terms. The same applies even more surely, I believe, if we had expanded the war into North Vietnam in 1968-69. Either of those adventures into a region where the population was, truly, solidly mobilized against us would have given us a poignant appreciation of a situation that offers (as in the South) the option of a moderately costly stalemate.

The notion that the conflicted political system in South Vietnam tended fairly stably to a violent equilibrium may be challenged with respect to two periods when, some believe, the stalemate could have been, or was about to be broken decisively: in 1962-63, in favor of the GVN ("if the momentum of the strategic hamlet program could have been continued, with more U.S. support"); or in 1965, when VC victory was believed imminent.

With respect to the first, Mike Arnsten argues that one can't say it was "impossible," or close to it, to defeat the Viet Cong totally in the early period, citing that:

(a) The VC were set back in 1962;

(b) Bombing, or the threat of bombing, might have worked in 1961-62 [though Arnsten agrees it could hardly have been used then] to lead North Vietnam to call off infiltration and the effort in South Vietnam. They were not then close to victory, as they were in 1964-65. [Though: they were no closer in late '65, after we put troops in, than in 1961, were they? Yet they persisted.]

On 1962, I would say it was inevitable that the appearance of choppers and other support would provide the VC with a setback; just as the appearance of U.S. troops and air support did in 1965. Moreover,

it was natural for this new development -- again as in 1965 -- to present them with a problem that would take them some time, at best, to solve, in the meantime making false moves against it. On the other hand, in neither case were the new measures capable of destroying the Party, given its tough roots and sanctuaries. Moreover, it should have been clear in 1962 that, given its background in 1945-54 and the leadership and support available in the North, the Party was capable of greatly expanding its organized strength, despite setbacks or the new pressures, beyond what had been seen so far. (This was also true in 1965, at least if the DRV chose to send more NVA: a decision that was evident -- e.g., to McNamara -- by at least November, 1965.)

The only real uncertainties, then, were:

(a) How much improvement RVNAF and the GVN would show. There was much basis in past experience for negative expectations on this, and current evidence was available in the field -- though often misrepresented -- throughout 1962-63. It was also foreseeable, however, after the guidance given to Nolting and, more importantly, the installation of COMUS/MACV, that Washington would not get a realistic picture.

(b) How quickly and well the VC would learn a solution to their new problems, and change adaptively. Experience from 1946-54 was available on this -- e.g., shifts in Viet Minh tactics in 1951 after losses in 1950 -- but was perhaps not conclusive. The answer began to come in at Ap Bac, January, 1963; though we were, predictably, slow to perceive it. If we had recognized it earlier than December, 1963, the VC "come-back" between July and December -- not markedly aided (until the fall, at least) by the turbulence in the cities -- should have been a major warning, or demonstration (as the Ia Drang Valley fighting in November, 1965 was, for McNamara) of the failure of our recent measures of support, and our strategy, to achieve a lasting success, proving the unsoundness of recent hopes.

The second belief, that VC total victory in 1965 or early '66 was forestalled only by the arrival of large American forces and airpower, is more widely, almost universally, held.

Yet even this is less clear than is commonly thought. It seems to me there is significant evidence for a contrary hypothesis: the likelihood that the Viet Cong would shortly take over completely in the South may not have been so large as we thought in 1965 (or in 1961) with the given GVN programs; nor would it have been much reduced by what we wanted GVN to do; nor was it much reduced by what U.S. did do (except, perhaps, by the first 50,000-75,000 troops in 1965.) Nor were the chances of destroying the VC, or even reducing it, ever large, or much increased by any of these.

How wrong was Ambassador Taylor in early 1965, in wanting to avoid or postpone U.S. troops? He was certainly mistaken in believing that current processes plus demonstrative bombing of the North, without U.S. forces or with only small levels of U.S. ground forces, would lead to the essential defeat of the V.C. But was he wrong in doubting (Westmoreland's view) that the GVN/ARVN effort would shortly be defeated and collapse, without large U.S. combat presence?

Suppose Nhu, in '63; or Minh in '64; or others in '65; had talked with the NLF, or the DRV, and had reached "accomodations," as we feared? Did they really, as we thought, have "nothing" to bargain with, to protect themselves? What kind of deal might they have gotten? How different from the best to be hoped for now?

Was ARVN in 1965 near collapse? Did ARVN commanders think so? (Were they as concerned as Westmoreland?) True, by 1965, the NVA could have come in (as they did, in large numbers in mid-'65 and after, in response to U.S. troops). But would they have, if we had not sent in troops and started bombing? Suppose we had retained a deterrent threat of bombing and U.S. troops, specifically against large-scale infiltration of NVA units?

Without U.S. help, the non-communist forces in South Vietnam would probably not have chosen to continue the war in support of the aims of

a totally repressive policy against communists. (U.S. help made that acceptable to enough of them to continue.) Does that mean that otherwise they would have peaceably accepted, or could not have resisted, total domination by communists? (Suppose that elections had been postponed till 1956-57; before that, but not clearly after, they might have voted in the Viet Minh, in competition with other local leadership.)

These questions are not to be answered here. I shall address them elsewhere, along with the question: Was there ever a real alternative course of intervention with more promise other than the one we followed? There is no guarantee, of course, that there was, or is (its existence does not follow from any of the criticisms I have made of our actual aims and policy). A number of analysts whose opinions I respect believe, and can cite evidence, that no viable political alternative has ever existed between total defeat of the Party (which many of these agree was unattainable) and, ultimately, total Party domination of Vietnam.

This is what André Beaufre would say, for the period after 1946-47. And I would agree with him, <u>for Tonkin</u>. Yet I have a feeling that he is not surely right for the Second Indochina War: that it was not, quite, impossible for some conceivable American purposes (other than the one we chose) to be achieved <u>in the South</u> in 1954 or 1957.

At the same time, I am not sure that this belief is a realistic one. It is hard for me to judge -- just because, perhaps, I am an American -- whether I have not merely <u>imagined</u> an American government that could have used the opportunities (imagined, too?) that seem, now, to have existed in 1956: a U.S. government that "could" have acted far differently than it actually did act in '56 and '61 and '67. It is hard, looking at one's own child, or lover, or country, to escape from a sense of hopeful possibility that an outsider has no difficulty in rejecting. And my belief that an attainable government of Vietnam, properly influenced by the U.S., had real opportunities it "could" have exploited likewise rests, I realize, largely on the judgment of certain Vietnamese who have the same problem as they look at their own country.

Our conjecture, at any rate (to be examined elsewhere) is that the same political factors in the South that have operated to stabilize violent stalemate in war might well have worked, also -- and might conceivably still -- to enforce "coexistence" in overt political competition.

If the war was not going to end with the destruction of the Communist Party, then either it was not going to end, ever, or there was going, someday, to be a "postwar" world in which a Communist Party would exist as a potential political (and subversive) force. Its role and influence would depend in large part on its political environment of competing organizations and popular attitudes and commitments. Its potential for support from the DRV and for a return to terrorism or guerilla war would, presumably, always exist in some degree.

Our problem might have been formulated: "How to assure, or increase the likelihood, of (a) a predominantly non-communist state -- or (b) a state not totally dominated by the communists -- despite the overt, continued operation of a Communist Party?" (Or, how to reduce the damage to U.S. interests if a communist state did come into being: e.g., the implication and stigma of military failure, or of political failure; the killing of individuals formerly aligned with the U.S.; subversion and agression in neighboring states; increased aggressiveness of other communist states or third parties, and a weakening of resolve in their targets; a prestige victory for Communist China, and an expansion of Chicom influence.)

Did it, in particular, ever become beyond realistic hope for us to "win " even in somewhat less ambitious terms in Vietnam: e.g., to restrict the communists reliably, indefinitely and "cheaply" -- without prolonged U.S. involvement -- to a strictly subordinate political role? That is not the only way to pose the question. One could ask the probabilities of success of various policies aimed at this, starting in different years: or the costs and risks or the likelihood of our adoptions, policies, if any, that had a high chance of succeeding. In a later paper I shall examine the case to be made on opposing sides of these issues. But on the question as presented above, I shall close by citing a judgment somewhat surprisingly negative in its view (like that of Beaufre) of opportunities foreclosed:

The general is American. So he does not make aphorisms; in fact, to a public or bureaucratic audience he talks, too often, in slogans and folksy colloquialism; but not to a friend. His views are not those of many American generals, or policy-makers. He knows more about Vietnam than any of them.

"No, it wasn't too late for that, I don't think, in 1956. In '56, '57 there was a chance. By 1958 and 1959, it was getting very late: maybe, as I see it now [in 1968], too late. But even in 1961, I thought then that there was a chance... At the same time, I can't be sure, any more; your Frenchman just may be right, even for the South. I can't say for sure he's not."

"When, if it has, did it become finally too late for us to meet such a goal?"

"In January, 1964: with the Khanh coup. The Minh Government had some possibilities. Khanh's coup finished them. And when the Americans began to shell the villages -- as they were almost bound to do -- about June of '65, that confirmed it. I knew there wasn't real hope after that."

As in the Frenchman's memory, dates overlap for this American, and for me, with harsh irony. A "last chance" for a truly favorable outcome expires... at least one year before the Americans launch their combat commitment... a year and a half before -- "confirmed" one month before -- the American general is called, and goes, back to Vietnam. Taking me with him.

RFK
WPB
(Boll)

OS C-R
GUN C-R

A
Work

INFEASIBLE GOALS AND VIOLENT STALEMATE

The date is September, 1968.

The occasion is a break at a conference of the Institute of Strategic Studies at Oxford, England.

The general, Andre Beaufre, is of a Western army whose cause was defeated by Asian Communists a decade and a half ago. The same Asian Communists that are defeating U.S. aims in the same country, in a war that the American, myself, has just left behind him. So I ~~listen with~~ a curious to ~~curiosity~~. hear him.

The general is French, therefore speaks in aphorisms; and he thinks in straight lines that sometimes take right-angle turns. A listener who misses a couple of these finds the general has come up behind him.

"In 1950, de Lattre de Tassigny asked me to go with him to Indochina as his deputy. I refused. He asked me what I thought of his assignment. I said: 'Mon général, you should not go there. You will lose your reputation there, and you will lose your health.'"

"And?"

"He went. I went with him. He did not lose his reputation there;

Query - Isn't Beaufre a leading military theorist and one of the chief critics of American military policies?

but he died."

So the general is an officer who tells unwelcome truths to his superior; ~~and~~ one who can envision a lost war. Rare qualities, no more appreciated, surely, in the French Army than in the American. ("Oh, no, my views were not popular among the staff," the general says.) But how did he become so wise? What had informed him?

"But I was there in 1947. At first, of course, I did not see it; but before long, before 1950, I saw that it was too late for us. The Vietnamese we might have allied with, to rally the people and confront the Communists, were dead by then. The Communist apparatus had grown too large, it penetrated too deeply...It was no longer to be defeated by us".

"When, then, was your last chance? When did it become too late?"

"1947. At the latest. Perhaps 1946."

1946? It was the end of that year that the French began fighting. They fought for seven more years.

The American thinks of his war, the American's war, that started--depending how you counted--four or five years, or a decade after 1954.

"Then what year did it become too late--if it ever did--for the Americans?"

"1947."

Very funny.

But what, exactly, could that mean? Could it be right?

In 1961 (or earlier), most American officials, myself included, would have known how to take that remark--that is, how to dismiss it: another Frenchman telling us that what the French couldn't do, the Americans could hardly expect to do. It meant, don't try: because you might show us up, might show that our failure was not inevitable for Westerners, that it really resulted from--as Americans believed--the corruptions of colonialism and bad faith, from racism, from the weaknesses of a rigid, ill-adapted army with a history of failure, an inadequate air force, and a divided public. From all of which, America, we were sure, was free. And the general's remark would have meant, as late as 1965, allow us the pleasure, to ease our own defeat, of having told yours in advance.

But in 1968, his proposition demanded more attention: even from a French general, especially a French general, who was evidently right from the start--in 1950. Eighteen years later it appeared that our differences from the French--some real, no doubt--had not, after all, made that much difference.

To return, then, to the questions that his answers pose: What might it mean, to say that U.S. aims, like the French ones, were infeasible after 1947? what is the evidence for such a judgment, what are its implications, and finally, could it be true?

U.S. AIMS AND FEASIBILITY

First, one must be clear what aims are in question. After all, one recurrent short-run goal, and the salient one in crisis after crisis--in 1950, '54, '61, '63, '65, '68--we attained without fail: preventing the imminent takeover by the Communists* of all of Vietnam. Though the cost of success kept rising, it was never "too late" to achieve this: not even after Dienbienphu; not even after the fall of Diem or after the Tet offensive.

* Throughout the paper, and others included here, the term "Communists" is short-hand for the leadership of the National Liberation Front (NLF), most of whose leaders are Communists but most of the members are not.

But it was never our intention to keep paying the price indefinitely of these short-run successes. It never suited our ambitions or our sense of U.S. interests to maintain forever in Vietnam for this defensive purpose U.S. forces of the scale even of 1963, let alone 1967. Our long-range aim was to create a permanent success--to block Communist control of all Vietnam, without the need of further crisis efforts or U.S. involvement. President Eisenhower formulated this aim in a letter to Diem in 1954 as the creation of "a strong, viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or aggression through military means." Yet that was not sufficiently specific, for it could be pursued by several conflicting approaches.

The approach we chose (and backed, in the hands of successive regimes) — i.e. in 1950, when we began direct support of the French effort — was initially the permanent exclusion of the Communist Party of Indochina from open politics, and ultimately, its total destruction as an organization. After 1954, we were forced to narrow the scope of our efforts to the operation and existence of the Communists in South Vietnam.

This, then, was the underlying operational meaning, in terms of official U.S. objectives, of winning in Vietnam. It meant a Malayan-

or a Philippine-type victory: destruction of the native Communist party; nearly-total attrition of its leaders and followers, almost all of them killed or dispersed, their weapons captured or buried; their formal surrender or "fadeaway" to the level of petty banditry. To this end the U.S. devoted increasingly sizeable resources of money, material, expertise and manpower, for twenty years. But never with any measurable degree of success. It is of this aim one asks: was it ever feasible?

Was General Beaufre right then? Was it truly impossible, from 1947 on, for the U.S. to achieve its central aim in Vietnam? The thought is both comforting and chilling.

In the face of our failure, it can be reassuring to those (I am one, in a minor way) who participated in that failure to believe that no one could have succeeded; and that none of the other possible actions, neither those one rejected nor those one recommended in vain, would have worked either. It is immediately tempting to take shelter in what we used to think of as the French syndrome, post-1954.

But with this comfort comes the pain of believing that one's individual efforts and that of his country were wasted, were hopeless

from the start: pain, above all, for those who hoped ~~(acted?)~~ foolishly, who failed to see the impossibility of the task, who on the contrary urged their government to undertake it, to stake the nation's prestige and its young men's lives, and then, to keep trying, to invest more, to press on harder... And scarcely less pain for the mass of those Americans who failed to express their doubts or actively to fight the drift. For many of our men died, because of that. And we killed many more of the Vietnamese, and gravely wounded a society. And bad things happened to our own country. No, the thought that failure was foredoomed cannot, after all, be satisfying to most Americans.

It could nevertheless be true. And if true, important. If a task is infeasible, and one fails to see this or even to imagine it, one's efforts to learn from the failures may only lead him badly astray. For perhaps ~~what is~~ the most important thing to be learned, is not that "this method won't work" or "that one should be tried," but rather, how to foresee or recognize an impossible task, so as to avoid it or back out from it, and to set more attainable goals. That means learning to ~~grasp~~ recognize the factors of the problem that determine feasibility; it means taking a more complex

and comprehensive view of our various interests and possible aims; it means understanding the limits of our own capabilities. These are questions one is not likely to ask ~~if he is~~ while still involved single-mindedly in trying to square the circle.

Thus, to say that the eradication of the Communist party, either in all of Vietnam or even in the South alone, was strictly unattainable by the U.S. and GVN after, say, 1947, would be to say that for most of a generation, the long-range policy of the U.S. was in pursuit of a chimera. It would not, then, be surprising that some of our programs were plainly inappropriate and that even those that aimed at more feasible goals, such as the defensive one of forestalling a complete Communist takeover, were inefficient and extravagantly expensive. Nor would it be surprising that other more feasible goals, such as the reduction of Communist control and influence to that of a minority, the creation of a more permanent, effective, and practicable non-Communist order, and the decrease of American responsibility and involvement were scarcely considered at all. They simply were not "aims." They were arrived at, if at all, by chance--and rarely.

The thesis of "impossibility" ~~cogently~~ would explains much else, as well. Yet others would disagree with it, and to enter debate with them on this soon leads to a dead-end, and, moreover, would foreclose a more useful approach.

First of all, the thesis can not be argued conclusively. There is no cogent mode of proof, or anything close to one. The factors are ~~so~~ Too complex and unclear and our general understanding of the phenomena and the systems is far too rudimentary to assert a thesis of impossiblity with any basis of conviction.

And, in the end, a believer in the effort can always argue, convincingly, that "impossibility" has not been proved. This leaves possibility. Not probability, large or small, not an estimate of costs and risks and time, nothing relevant or useful to decision except a judgment of non-impossibility. Advocates of commitment or escalation ask for no larger opening; through that crack they have pushed their policies in nearly every crisis of the last two decades. Take, for example, the dialectic, and the conclusion, in Herman Kahn's Can We Win In Vietnam? Kahn's answer to the question is "Maybe"; his basis is the absence of

conclusive proof to the contrary;* his policy inference is "Try."

*Summarizing the views of the five participants in the symposium published in Can We Win In Vietnam? (New York, 1968, p. 13), Kahn concludes:

> "On this central issue--'Can we win?--we all take seriously the analysis made by some North Vietnamese, the NLF, and at one time, the U.S. Government: i.e., the U.S. effort involves basic contradictions, and increased military efforts may be self-defeating. However, while (William) Pfaff and (Edmund) Stillman argue that the case for this point of view is clear and certain, the other three authors, although willing to believe that--in principle--these 'contradictions' by themselves might be enough eventually to cause a U.S. defeat in Vietnam, continue to question the seriousness and unmitigable nature of the contradictions. Thus we question their general assumption that it is virtually impossible for a foreign army to legitimize a weak and narrowly based government that is experiencing a revolutionary challenge."

Later Kahn remarks to his two opponents:

> "What bothers me...and let me just throw this out to Pfaff and Stillman...is just how you two can be almost certain that you know the outcome." (p. 347)

The replies of Stillman and Pfaff are similar in character to the approach I shall pursue:

> "One never is sure. But you can read the evidence." (p.?) Stillman: "It seems to me that to make a gloomy prognosis... is not very daring

at all. You began by asking how we could be so sure. We are not sure: we are merely dealing in terms of probability. But I would say that on the basis of the record of the last fourteen years, ours is a quite reasonable diagnosis." (p.349)

In Kahn's argument, as frequently in that of our policy makers, "possibility" of success is a sufficient reason for pressing ahead with current efforts, for the alternative of accepting defeat is seen to be so gravely ominous--or as many key policy papers have put it, "intolerable"--that one need not ask the probability of success, or its cost and risks, or those of failure. [See "The Pentagon Myth...," below, for a discussion of the "Desperate Political Option."]

DPP

As I shall discuss, the consequences of precluding these important questions of cost, risk, and probabilities from being raised or answered in the decision process is a strong reason in itself to be wary of regarding undesireable outcomes as strictly "intolerable," "unacceptable," or "disastrous", in a literal and extreme sense, however compelling those terms may seem. The same line of reason against ~~premature~~ characterising aims as "unattainable" or "infeasible," or "impossible." It is not that this judgment is meaningless, nor that evidence and ~~reasoning~~ cannot be brought to support it, nor that it cannot be made highly relevant to policy. It is that in matters of such uncertainty and complexity, it answers certain questions dramatically and conveniently but at the cost of cutting off many others.

There is an alternative approach that follows from these very questions that the first one ignores: "What are the odds of achieving this aim by a given approach, or by conceivable alternatives? What are the odds of doing this within a given time, at a given cost, or within "acceptable" margins of cost and time, ~~at a given cost, or within "acceptable" margins of cost and time~~, by U.S. agencies as they now exist. Or, to what extent would the latter need to change their methods, personnel, structure, orientation? ~~What are the costs and the risks~~? How and why are various approaches likely to fail, if they do; what are the likely and possible consequences of failure? Is the problem easy, very difficult, or neither?"

Let me, then, reformulate my answer (argued below) to the question of "feasibility" raised earlier: the methods we used, as we used them, were almost sure to fail to eliminate the communist organization, given the conditions in Vietnam after 1947, and even more so after '54 or '60. Other methods proposed, used successfully elsewhere by others against other opponents, would probably have had little more success. Changes in the character or performance of U.S. or the GVN (or the VC) that

that might radically have improved the implementation of such approaches or brought them close to success, would have been difficult to bring about and were most unlikely to occur. U.S./GVN success at this chosen task may not have been impossible. But it was a very bad bet.

Sometimes there are no good bets. In fact, that would be a fair appreciation of our choices in Vietnam. But even though our Intelligence appraisals often realistically recognized this state of affairs, our operational estimates and plans almost never seemed to do so, much less consider just how bad this particular gamble might be.

ANTI-COMMUNIST POLICY AND THE LIKELIHOOD OF WAR

At the same time, the question of how likely, all things considered, our efforts were to fail was a particularly relevant one. For the total eradication of the Communist Party in South Vietnam was not an aim likely to "fail well." That is, an effort that fell short was not likely to serve lesser objectives such as the containment and reduction, to a minority role, of Communist influence; or the permanent avoidance, at a sustainable cost, of total Communist dominance and control; or, a phasing-down of U.S. responsibility and involvement.

On the contrary, the effort to minimize the short-run risk of a Communist takeover and to maximize prospects (mainly illusory) of the eventual extirpation of the Communists tempted the GVN to adopt certain policies and neglect others, forming a pattern that was actually counter-productive to other viable, realistic aims. It led, that is, to a strictly repressive approach, applied (almost inevitably, by a government like the GVN in the circumstances of Vietnam) in a clumsy, undiscriminating way that was not merely helpful but perhaps essential--with the departure of the French and the relatively tranquil period from 1954-58--to the large scale growth of guerrilla support and the alienation of potential

government allies.

In practice, a policy of violently "rooting out" the Communists and meanwhile excluding them systematically from open political participation did prevent them from achieving a "cheap, quick win" by subversion or elections; and it did so fairly inexpensively at first (1954-60), and with only moderate U.S. involvement up to 1965. But it provided ideal growing weather for a resurgent guerilla movement capable of the major military challenge that nearly triumphed by 1964, and for its political machine that posed an increasing rather than diminishing threat in any eventual political contest. Meanwhile, those difficult, risky (in short-run military and political terms) and unpleasant measures to prepare and strengthen the government and non-Communist forces for a long-term competition with Communists were made that much less eligible in the context of a policy designed to provide the Government eventually with a "Communist-free environment."

But, as I will argue, that environment was not likely to come about, ever. Still less was it likely to come about "peacefully," through quasi-civil processes, given the repressive approach we backed. Thus from the beginnings of the Republic of Vietnam in 1954, a new Indochina War was likely.

The ingredients were: (1) the refusal by both the U.S. and the GVN to associate themselves with the Geneva Accords calling for a peaceful settlement of the unification issue by elections in 1956; (2) the determination of the U.S. to do all it could (perhaps short of sending combat forces) to prevent the further extension of a Communist government within Vietnam; (3) the inclination of the U.S. (though initially, with reservations) to back Diem, a man strongly oriented to a policy of uncompromising repression of the Communists; (4) the dedication of the DRV leadership to the goals of unification and communization of all Vietnam by peaceful means, if possible, but by violent means, if necessary; (5) the capacity of the VC at any point after 1954 to launch within a short time (6 to 18 months) a sizeable guerilla insurgency. (An insurgent force of the scale of 1964-68 may have required strong help from both the DRV and, inadvertantly, from the GVN).

The VC capacity was based upon: (a) a tested, disciplined Viet Minh organization, left behind in 1954; (b) a large pool of Southern "regroupees", available in the North for training and infiltration; (c) support from the DRV; (d) sizeable popular sympathy from the pre-1954 period (down from perhaps 80% to perhaps 25% of the population but still sizeable ~~by 1956~~);

shakeouts? (e) highly experienced and dedicated top leadership, safe from destruction in the DRV, with a pool of experienced high-level leaders (along with lower cadres) to replace any lost in the South; and (f) close access to border sanctuaries, for leaders, headquarters and units under pressure.

The origins of these assets all dated earlier than 1954. They are implicit in the alternative dates that identify? Vu Van Thai suggests (agreeing broadly with the estimate of General Beaufre) that mark, more and more definitely, when it became "too late" to extirpate the Communist organization from Vietnam:

"1. After the August 1945 abdication surrender by the Emperor Bao Dai to Ho and the Viet Minh, leaving the Viet Minh holding Hanoi.

2. By December, 1946, when destruction of other nationalist groups had been completed and fighting broke out against the French--under the Communist banner.

3. By 1949: the coming of Chinese Communists to the border of Vietnam. (At that point, the French fight becomes Sisyphean.)

4. After 1954: the Viet Minh apparatus in the South had a heritage of prestige from victory over the French, tested cadre, and existence of an international base (NVN) to provide

only three!

training, know-how, finance, leadership.

After 1954, the elements for survival in the South were definitive (unlike Malaya): abundance of food in the Delta, potential assistance all around (not just in the cities like the Chinese population in Malaya), border and cross-border sanctuaries, help from NVN, a pool of regroupees, a cadre almost uniquely well-guided and experienced in clandestine organization." XE-19127, p. 67

Given these factors, and a realistic (or even optimistic) appraisal of GVN administrative, military, and police efficiency, the Communist capability for guerilla operations could not be destroyed short of an internal war. Nor, probably, could it be destroyed even in a war, by an optimal process of GVN development. Or, to follow our ~~new~~ preferred formulation: it was most unlikely to be destroyed; and the task of doing so would have been of the highest order of difficulty.

This capability for armed resistance was almost sure to be triggered into an open internal war once it was seriously challenged--or the personal security of members of the apparatus endangered--by military/police pressures from the Diem regime. Such pressure was probable from 1956 on, given Diem's self-confidence after meeting the challenge from the non-Communist sects, and the increasing

influence of Nhu.

War, then, was probable. It was not a war the Communists were likely to lose, in the sense either of their destruction or their permanent acceptance of exclusion from politics. Yet it was not--it seems to me--one they were certain to win, in the sense of achieving an overwhelmingly dominant role in the politics of South Vietnam. The chance of that outcome depended on policies other than the broad aim of Communist-suppression, that Diem was to follow and these were neither thoroughly foreseeable nor, perhaps, predetermined in 1954.

Nevertheless, the more one knew of Diem--and some Vietnamese arrived at a pretty clear impression, in meetings in 1954--the more one could have foreseen the course he actually did choose. He was to follow his true instincts and nature, and the U.S. was content to let him, despite the fact that to back a narrowly-based, anti-Communist government in South Vietnam would seem a high-risk policy, the more so as the U.S. ventured its prestige, on this outcome, and on this regime. Yet we did so, not "inadvertantly," but for considered reasons that led to a similar policy both earlier (1950-54) and later (1964-67), each time after considerable internal calculations and debate.

(To judge by this internal argumentation,)

We thought we needed to destroy the Communist organization in South Vietnam; to prevent a coalition with it, or even its open participation in politics; or even a GVN failure to use maximum pressure against it; all this to avoid an out-and-out Communist domination of South Vietnam. We regarded the inadequacy and factionalism of the non-Communist groups as immutable for at least a decade. We believed the Communist domination of South Vietnam by any means spelled probable Communist domination of all of Southeast Asia, with "intolerable" consequences for U.S. prestige, influence and allies.

Hence, the only chance of avoiding this great loss was to exclude Communist participation, and pursue the Communist organization to its destruction or neutralization. This policy required:

(a) A militantly anti-Communist government (one inclined to fight Communism and, hence, to exclude those non-Communist elements that might be inclined to make a deal with it).

(b) A "strong" government (decisive, disciplined, coordinated, capable of preventing "chaos" in the South, and of providing strong leadership for military-police measures).

Both required, in the conditions of Vietnam in 1954, a narrowly-based government; and the only available

leader--Diem--that fitted both requirements was one inclined to antagonize other non-Communist elements; to repress all opposition, eschew legality, harass the population; also, to rely on family rule, exacerbating his administrative weaknesses. Moreover--as was likely, though less inevitable--he chose to show preference to, and rely heavily on, Catholics, non-Southerners, and former servants of the French and Bao Dai regimes (rather than of the liberation struggle).

Little weight was given--in practice--to the possibility that a broadly-based non-Communist government--though less decisive, with more internal conflict, and more tolerant of the Communists' existence and quasi-legal activities--might:

(a) draw greater public support and create a more difficult environment for violent Communist tactics or recruiting; especially that it might

(b) deprive Communists of allies;

(c) be more able to enlist organizations (e.g. the Sects, the unions) as allies and mobilize population;

(d) recruit more talent into the GVN, providing, in time, better administration;

(e) be more able to foster administrative and military reform, given less insecurity from non-Communist opposition.

Such a government might have had a much better chance of containing or even suppressing revolutionary violence, and of keeping the Communist organizations politically subordinate, even though (in part, because) it did not attempt to suppress them entirely. The latter attempt (almost surely unsuccessful) was likely to be made in South Vietnam only by a regime, and in a manner, that could not succeed in any of the above respects.

Meanwhile, the Viet Cong were unquestionably capable of gaining enough support from the rural population to grow into a large-scale military force--one that could be prevented from winning only at great cost and eventually only by a sizeable number of U.S. troops, unless the mass of the population were prevented initially--up to 1958--from developing an antipathy to the GVN that counterbalanced, or outweighed, their antipathy to the Viet Cong. After 1958, there was the growing phenomenon of a "double allergy" of resentment toward both sides. At the very least, this balance of antipathy had to be reversed against the Viet Cong even if the masses were not won to strong support of the GVN. So much was essential if the costs, efforts and risks of the Viet Cong operation and growth were to be increased critically and those of the GVN reduced to sustainable levels.

This is to say that the current high cost of containing the Communists may not have been inevitable, even though it was likely. In contrast to efforts to eradicate the Communist organization, which were virtually sure to fail most expensively, efforts to contain its growth and influence far short of a military takeover or political dominance, at a cost sustainable indefinitely by the GVN and the U.S. were probably not hopeless, and indeed, may still not be. (It is even possible that the odds to achieve this goal--given appropriate policy--are still as good as they ever were, perhaps as high as 50%--Thai's guess--even though the short-term costs have grown inescapable high.) But to achieve this end depended then--and now--not only upon radical improvements in administration, military, and police efforts within the GVN but upon the attitudes of the population toward the Viet Cong and the GVN: in particular, to the degree people were or could be mobilized and guided by effective leaders within non-Communist organizations.

It was never likely that the GVN could effectively organize the population to this end. Spontaneous organization by local or factional leaders of religious,

labor, student or regional groups provided a far greater hope of effectiveness. The critical issues, then, were as follows: whether the GVN would permit and encourage the emergence of such effective leadership and the growth of organizations capable of attracting popular participation and resisting Communist dominance; whether it would permit and encourage the coalescence of these factions in the face of the Communist threat; and whether it would in its own operations refrain from alienating large numbers of individuals and groups in both the countryside and the cities by its policies and by the behavior of its civil and military representatives.

In fact, it did none of these. Nor did the U.S. ever bring its influence to bear in this direction. On the contrary. Diem used the same tactics against the VC that he had used earlier against the Sects and that the French has used for a hundred years: excluding most organized groups from effective participation in the government, and restricting even their local influence; and encouraging conflict within and between such groups in order to divide-and-rule. These tactics had worked effectively to suppress non-Communist threats to the French, and then to Diem's, authority. But they were not effective against either an expertly-led, highly

motivated revolutionary organization of national scope. Nor were these tactics appropriate to create an environment of support for the Government and resistance to the Viet Cong suitable for confronting such a threat--not for the French, or for Diem, or for his successors.

What made the Communist challenge so formidable was not that they enjoyed the willing support of the majority of the population in South Vietnam; in contrast to the war against the French in Tonkin, they almost surely did not. But the amount of willing support (appropriately located in the countryside) they did enjoy, whether that was 25% or even 10% of the total population, was enough to make the task of containing and reducing their influence, let alone suppressing them, highly difficult and problematic.

For the GVN, facing such a challenge, to multiply its internal enemies, and to alienate potential allies and support, amounted to recklessness. Worse than that, it meant that a significant part of the resources that were available to the Government, such as military units and police intelligence, had to be devoted to detecting opposition other than that of the Communists. It also meant that Diem was so dependent on the army, the main element of his base of support, that he could

not afford to take measures to improve its effectiveness, such as making appointments on the grounds of professional ability rather than personal loyalties, lest he increase ARVN's will or ability to overthrow him. For the U.S., then, to oppose a sizeable and powerful faction by backing another minority faction, one that was heedless of support and careless of incurring the hostility of other groups, was hardly a promising policy.

The relevance of non-Communist political support or opposition was not limited to the countryside. Any threat to or vulnerability of the regime, wherever located--whether in the cities, in the U.S., or within the GVN structure itself--that deflected its attention or resources from the struggle with the Viet Cong--contributed directly to the security and intractibility of the ~~VC~~ insurgency in the countryside. Moreover, absence of willing, active support of the regime, or rather, its thinness, even in the cities, created a major political vulnerability. It meant that any significant non-Communist (or Communist-inspired) opposition that <u>did</u> arise (like the militant Buddhist opposition in 1963, which was organized perhaps no earlier than 1961) would find the GVN naked of allies, except for the Army and the U.S., so that the regime

this is a relevant point, no?

would be more dependent than ever on their loyalty and strength. In 1963, neither support proved reliable and the regime collapsed.

But even before 1963, and for later regimes, it was evident that no one else could be counted on to help the regime in countering a sharp challenge, even from a small minority, which, on the other hand, might quickly find allies in opposing the government. Hence, the need for alertness to any such challenge, and the growing tendency to rely on quick repression. This is why ~~the~~ orientation and deployment of the police force and Special Branch Intelligence (and such units as the Vietnamese Special Forces) were designed mainly for use against non-Communist threats in the cities. This contributed to the weakness of the GVN in the countryside, and to its lack of focus, to this day, in coping with the Communist apparatus.

During the First Indochina War, ~~its~~ U.S. policy had emphasized the analysis of political issues, particularly that of nationalism rather than methods of action and pressure. After 1954, however, we tended to think (mistakenly) that the issue of nationalism had disappeared and shifted our emphasis to the policy of "containing Communism in North Vietnam." After 1956, the internal political problems in Vietnam seemed to us secondary (except at critical points such as ~~(as in~~ the fall of 1960, or the summer of 1963).

Don, I think the editing of this paragraph maintains our meaning (I've tried to make it less cryptic) but it's still pretty unsatisfactory

By 1961, the emphasis on enlarging our military establishment in South Vietnam had generally swamped perceptions of the importance of politics.

Meanwhile, Diem had learned by his experience during his first years in power to trust his own judgment when it conflicted with U.S. advice. And he had come to realize that the U.S. government would not compel its wishes and would support his success (even if he went against its advice). U.S. influence was weakened (as in dealing with French) by the fact that its prestige was committed to success, yet it was reluctant to take full command and responsibility, or to commit U.S. troops. Thus Diem could afford direct confrontation with the U.S. or with other opponents rather than enter into compromises with the former or alliances with the latter.

All of which lowered our leverage on Diem. Between 1958 and 1961, Ambassador Durbrow did "urge" Diem to build a broader political base rather than to aggressively guard his narrow one. But this "urging" was ineffective (perhaps, as its critics claimed, counterproductive), in part because it was less than halfhearted. There was never a confident sense among U.S. policy makers of the reasons and their importance for Diem to follow political tactics that went so

against his instincts. He had, after all, been successful--to our suprise, and far beyond our hopes--in using his own tactics to contain the initial non-Communist challenges to his rule.

To most American officials, the main reason for reforming Diem's politics was not to confront the Communist resurgence with a broader opposition but to reassure the American public that we were not supporting a dictatorship. But however desirable this aim was, it did not seem important enough to risk compromising our joint effort against the Viet Cong, or even to risk reducing Diem's sense of assurance in combatting them, or his willingness to accept our military and technical, if not political, advice.

(I've cut the rest of this page ((p.18)). Most of it seems to be going over the ground covered by the preceding analysis. Any new and relevant points could be incorporated into the previous discussion.)

American officials who complained of the "moralizing" about Diem's politics in 1958-63 probably approved of Diem's "moralizing" About the Binh Xuyen and other Sects as "corrupt, self-interested, depraved, venal, hypocritical, political..." On such grounds, he justified his refusal to conciliate them and his measures to divide and weaken them.

~~as it was,~~ did not seem important enough to compromise our joint effort against the ~~communists within Vietnam~~ Viet Cong, or even Diem's sense of assurance (or willingness to accept our military and technical advice) ~~in combatting them.~~

In 1954 we still, as in 1950, saw as "necessary" a government capable of winning the active loyalty and support of the local population in the South. We saw some but not all of the limitations of a Diem-type regime in winning such loyalty. Diem's success in 1954-56 in suppressing organized challenges to his rule did not reflect either popular support or characteristics helpful in winning such support. On the contrary, the very means of Diem's early successes were an adequate basis for predicting his later failure, his alienation of most groups, and weakness with respect to a non-communist overthrow. However, the success of these early efforts was a surprise, undermining confidence in other gloomy predictions (i.e., providing a foothold for wishfulness). At the same time (1956-57) the future communist threat -- and hence the need for widespread loyalty -- had, somewhat unaccountably, come to be deprecated. And when that mood changed (1960-61), it seemed too late either to change the regime, to repair its failings, or to change public attitudes. Meanwhile, U.S. policy-making influence had shifted to those who either thought peasant loyalty rather easily won by military, "civic action" and administrative measures (as in colonialist "pacification" in the 19th century); or tended to disregard it; or reluctantly abandoned pressures to achieve it, as conflicting with Diem's acceptance of higher-urgency measures.

We had been surprised by Diem's riding out the military challenge from the Sects and Army; but that in itself gave little basis for hope against the communists. He did not exhibit flexibility; yet a switch to different methods (including conciliation of the just-defeated Sects) was essential to fight communists. Above all, he needed allies; whereas he didn't against the Sects, which were more easily bribed and their leaders destroyed and against whose poorly-trained troops ARVN was adequate.

Those who complain of the U.S. "moralizing" about Diem in 1958-63, probably approved Diem's "moralizing" about the Binh Xuyen and other Sects as "corrupt, self-interested, depraved, venal, hypocritical, political..." on which basis he justified his refusal to conciliate them and his measures to divide and weaken them.

We applauded the destruction -- instead of requiring a coalition -- of the Sects, and took hope in the deterioration in strength and cohesiveness of Diem's non-communist opposition. But these groups, which outweighed in numbers the Catholics, Army, and Northern refugees as the potential opposition to the communists!

But the Vietnamese were in a three-person (or more) non-zero-sum game. These moves meant a decrease in threat both to Diem and to the communists; and which would exploit this opportunity better in the long run? Thus, the Army was reduced as a threat to Diem, strengthened as Diem support, by emphasis on personal loyalty of officers, by frequent shifts in command and by dividing commands, at the cost of professionalism. By the same process, ARVN was reduced as a threat to the Viet Cong. As with the Sects: obstacles to Viet Cong growth were removed along with threats to Diem's control.

Thus, we virtually ignored what was probably the fastest and most effective possible measure to slow and contain the growth of the Viet Cong in the Delta; a changed policy toward the Sects. And we condoned a totally unnecessary exclusionist policy toward urban opposition, and the growth of rigid, autocratic, repressive practices and reflexes that led in two years to the destruction of the regime and a consequent "great leap forward" by the Viet Cong in the countryside.

Instead of pressing for a coalition, American officials went along with Die
even applauding the destruction of the Sects, just as they took hope in the deterioration in strength and cohesiveness of Diem's other non-Communist groups and factions. Yet these groups far outweighed in numbers the Catholics, Army, and Northern refugees as the potential opposition to the Communists.

Thus, we virtually ignored what was probably the fastest and most effective possible measure to slow and contain the growth of the Viet Cong in the Delta; a changed policy toward the Sects. And we condoned a totally unnecessary exclusionist policy toward urban opposition, and the growth of rigid, autocratic, repressive practices and reflexes that led in two years to the destruction of the regime in 1963 and a consequent "great leap forward" by the Viet Cong in the countryside.

To put it another way, the Vietnamese were in a three-person (or more) non-zero-sum game. Its moves meant a decrease in threat both to Diem and to the Communists; and which side would exploit this opportunity better in the long run? Thus, the Army was reduced as a threat to Diem and fashioned into his main base of support, by emphasis on the personal loyalty of officers and by frequent shifts in command and dividing commands. But by the same process, ARVN was reduced as a threat to the Viet Cong. Similarly with the Sects: their repression removed obstacles to Viet Cong growth along with threats to Diem's control.

THE LEGITIMACY OF COMMUNIST STRUGGLE

A long-standing argument for the ~~pursuit~~ harassment of Communists and their exclusion from politics in Vietnam is that the failure to repress them would "give" them legitimacy, legality, thereby "giving away" a prime and effective GVN propaganda slogan. Yet, concern about the symbolic or practical effects of conferring legitimate status upon the Viet Cong or the Communist Party flies against history and reality. It ignores the fact that the right of the Party to exist and even to participate in power could hardly be in dispute in the eyes of the Vietnamese populance. It was not something to be "granted" or taken away by any act of the Diem government or any later GVN, or by the U.S. Not after formal recognition of the Party-dominated DRV as a government by Bao Dai (in 1945) and by the French (in 1945-46); not after eight years of leading the successful resistance against the French; not while it continued to be led by the leaders of the liberation, the most respected group of leaders in the country, headed by the national hero.

On the contrary, any regime that excluded this party from political participation, harassed it, and indiscriminately stigmatized its members as "criminals" and "traitors"

could only gravely undermine its own legitimacy as the protector of law and order, of justice, and of Vietnamese aspirations. Moreover, to act in these ways was to guarantee resistance; and at the same time to totally legitimize it. Whether or not an individual or group sympathized with the Communists' ultimate aims (by 1956, the majority probably did not), few Vietnamese would deny that by 1958 the Communists had been offerred no alternative to armed resistance to maintain not only their own organizational functioning but their own personal security. What more could be done to assure the legitimacy, along with the inevitability, of this struggle?

This much could be seen even by those Vietnamese who approved, on balance, a repressive policy, or who would have done the same had they been in power. Yet neither they, nor the U.S. officials, seem ever to have given much thought to the consideration that an "unnecessary" struggle by Communists against a "just regime"--one that, among other things, accepted the peaceful participation of a Communist-led faction, along with that of a non-Communist opposition--would not only have lacked legitimacy but would thereby have been greatly reduced in effectiveness. Against a "just" regime, assasinations, threats, and conspiracies would have had the color truly of offenses against law

and order, of criminal acts, rather than of unavoidable acts of resistance to injustice. Such a change could have strengthened public sympathy and the will to cooperate with the regime, weakened the morale of the insurgent minority, and, perhaps above all, strengthened the morale of the government forces themselves, who, in the absence of a just order to defend, were always vulnerable to the charge of being unprincipled mercenaries.

(I've cut here--repetitious by now)

As an imaginable alternative, the GVN (and U.S.) could have deterred or suppressed unmistakably criminal acts by Communists. Or if the terrorism of the VC had reached a sufficient magnitude, the GVN could then have declared it to be criminal and acted against it. But it could hardly do so, and expect any degree of popular support, simply by declaring it to be criminal, especially the Diem regime. In any case, the origins, nature, and purposes of the Viet Minh/Viet Cong were nothing like those of the urban gangster machine, the Binh Xuyen. Use of "revolutionary violence," even terrorism, does not equate the Viet Cong with the Mafia (despite the fondness of the U.S. Administration for this parallel, to be found not only in the memos of Walt Rostow but,

moved from p. 23 to p. 24 xx Dan, does this maintain your meaning?

among other places, in speeches I drafted in 1964-65), any more than it does the Irish Republicans, or the Israeli Irgun, or the Fedayeen, or the Cypriot, Algerian or Kenyan terrorists.

The "criminal" label could only be persuasively attached, then, in a society where the NLF they had the right to organize peacefully in political opposition, free from unfair harassment, and nevertheless relied on violent coercion. Then, perhaps, even the Viet Cong could not have drawn enough support from the public to persist profitably in large-scale violence. Otherwise, if they but as long as they were allowed, along with their other strengths and advantages, the (martyr) role of rebels against a regime that unjustly persecuted and excluded them, they were not to be destroyed: nor was the violence to be curtailed.

Not only the prudence of American policy, but the sincerity of our espoused ideals has been was repeatedly called into question by the U.S. intervention in Vietnam: first in support of a colonialist power, then in support of a dictatorship, with the aim of suppressing a minority of the population of the size and with the historic and organizational credentials of the Viet Minh. Indeed, after the eight-year war against the French, to back exclusively a rigidly anti-Communist policy or regime

in Vietnam (as distinct from one strongly competitive to Communist efforts) seems as implausible, in terms of strategy and as questionable in terms of legitimacy and justice, as it would be in France or Italy. And as imprudent. For it was at least as heedless for an anti-Communist government to launch a campaign of repression and imprisonment against Communists in South Vietnam as it would have been, after the Second World War, or would be now, in France or Italy. To do so, as Diem did, without assuring or even seeking, the strongest possible alliance with other non-Communist forces in the society, was no less than pure recklessness. And to pursue the Communists while simultaneously--by exclusion, neglect and generalized repression--multiplying enemies and alienating most potential allies: this was recklessness squared.

Yet it was just when this fatal pattern became obvious and probably irrevocable--by 1959-61--that the U.S. commenced to increase its investment of prestige in an anti-Communist success; just as it had in 1950, when it chose to join the fight against the Viet Minh immediately after the Chinese Communists had linked borders to the insurgency, and made its defeat, or even the avoidance of its total success in Tonkin, close to infeasible.

Dan— this seems like too important a point to be tossed in at the last minute, as it were.

Given our unstinting support, even this egregious political policy did not assure a defeat for the GVN; so long as the VC political policy was almost equally short-sighted, and reckless, in narrowing its Communist appeal and backing. But it did assure a costly and indecisive struggle.

ANTI-COMMUNIST AIMS AND THE LIKELIHOOD OF COSTLY STALEMATE

It is, I believe, misleading to see the persistence of the Communist Party in South Vietnam as caused by either errors of omission by the GVN and the United States--"if only they had done X...or done it sooner, or bigger..."--or by errors of commission--"if only they had not done Y...or if they had not done Z so poorly..." It follows from all the preceding discussion that the survival in some significant scale of the Viet Cong with North Vietnam's support, was simply not very vulnerable to policies or actions within the scope of the GVN, even within the fullest support of the United States, and especially within the range of military or purely repressive policy. That is what is meant by saying the eradication of the Party, after 1954 (or perhaps, as General Beaufre asserts, after 1946-47) was maximally difficult, highly unlikely, or close to "impossible." It means that to believe otherwise runs the risk of drawing wrong "lessons," both as to what might "work," elsewhere or in the future, and what would not work.

At the same time, other aspects of the actual or potential situation--including costs of the effort, its ongoing effectiveness, and the final outcome in terms

of Communist influence in South Vietnam--were, I believe, highly sensitive to GVN/U.S. policy: more sensitive, and over a wider range of feasible outcomes, I suspect, than most people imagine, even those Americans close to the problem. This is not to say that either GVN or U.S. policy was very flexible or could easily have been changed. Such change, I would guess, would have been at best difficult and chancy to bring about, and perhaps unstable once achieved. Actual policies and practices were not, doubtless, absolutely inevitable; but they seem to me to have been in most cases the "natural," the easiest and most likely courses for us to follow, as events evolved. Yet to the extent that GVN/U.S. policy could have been different, or could still change or evolve--in particular, with respect to Vietnamese politics--I believe it could still make a very strong difference.

This is very far from either a fatalistic or even a pessimistic outlook, even about the final outcome. Though I am extremely dubious that the total victory we have generally sought was ever really obtainable, I have come, if still tentatively, to agree with a small group of observers (mostly Vietnamese), on the possibility of outcomes other than the alternative one--the total

Communist domination of the government, politics and society of South Vietnam. These would be intermediate outcomes, involving some measure of compromise (of past Communist aims), and of "coexistence" of Communists with non-Communist structures, groups, interests, traditions.

In contrast, nearly all U.S. opinion, inside and outside the U.S. Government, has accepted the view tacitly or explicitly that no state of affairs between total Communist domination and total eradication of Communists as an organized body could be even moderately stable or peaceful, without a major, continued U.S. presence. It is this view that is the more fatalistic, if one rules out or abandons the aim of achieving the total elimination of Communism from South Vietnam. At the same time, this view has some tendency to be self-confirming, for it supports policies that repress and weaken those non-Communist factions, "oppositionist" from the point of view of the GVNs we have backed, on whom a strong compromise solution would depend. (I do not merely assume, or assert, that such an aim of "containment" and "coexistence" is, or would have been, in any sense less "ambitious" in terms of feasibility, less difficult or contingent, than the anti-Communist role we set ourselves.)

But given the aims we did choose, the successive stages of U.S. involvement that actually occurred followed, I would say, not quite inexorably but with considerably high likelihood. To summarize the preceding argument: Given our view of U.S. interests and available paths to protect them, U.S. backing for a strictly anti-Communist policy in Vietnam was likely, hence also our support for Diem or for a closely similar regime. Given the repressive policies of such a regime, as they were likely to be implemented, and given conditions in Vietnam and the historic strengths of the VC, the result was not likely to be a successful, "peaceful" attrition of Communist organization, but rather the growth of Communist strength and the outbreak of internal war.

It was furthermore likely (though less strongly so, it seems to me, than earlier or later steps in this sequence) that the performance of both sides--one increasingly directed and supported by Hanoi; the other by Washington--would be such as to tilt the balance in this overt conflict gradually against the GVN, making U.S. support (and eventually combat involvement) increasingly necessary to its survival. But U.S. views and practices, as they evolved, made that increased involvement likely, if and when it became needed. From 1961 on, it was needed, and quickly came about.

To take the argument now one step further, I believe that, given a certain level of U.S. presence, the fundamental dynamics of the war have moved it towards stalemate (furthermore, stalemate at high cost to the United States, though the United States could--if it would behave differently--probably achieve the same results or better at a much lower cost). That is, I believe that protracted, high-cost, indecisive conflict was highly probable, that it was well-determined, even over-determined, and that changes in one or a few factors would not easily have changed this outcome.

That is to say that the mechanism of US/GVN/VC/DRV/Soviet/Chicom interaction has not "tended" to victory, gradual or quick, of the GVN or of the VC (except as U.S. domestic tolerance of a U.S. presence is gradually undermined: which we promote by letting costs become and stay high). So long as a certain level of U.S. support persisted (less than our 1966-1969 levels) the outcome of the war was not likely to be a victory for either side. And this followed, I believe, from some fundamental factors besides the obvious ones of U.S. resources and concern for its prestige, on the one hand, and Communist expertise in South and North Vietnam, on the other.

(I've cut from here((p. 27)) to p. 30 where you pick up the specific factors of stalemate. The intervening

discussion tends to be somewhat repetitive of the previous analysis and also somewhat sketchy when you get into the First Vietnam War.)

US role

FACTORS TOWARD STALEMATE

Backing an anti-Communist strategy since 1956, we have been, in Vu Van Thai's phrase, "Fighting 20% of the population with 25%." (Thai's figures are rough, hence reversible.) This has led to a stalemate, at ever increasing levels of conflict, destruction, commitments of force and costs. The factors involved can be listed as follows:

(1) The Viet Cong are too numerous, well-rooted, resolute, etc. to be destroyed (see discussion above).

(2) GVN/ARVN capability are too large (given U.S. aid) to be destroyed without NVA opposition (contrary to Westmoreland's view in the spring of 1965), or given U.S. combat support, even with NVA's opposition. (GVN/ARVN's will to fight might crack, but even this development, as the Tet offensive of 1968 indicates, may have been overestimated by all parties: the U.S., the VC/DRV, and the GVN itself.

major" or "all-out"? there has been NVA opposition in the past.

(3) Neither side is capable of dominating the other, or even preventing the other's growth, without winning over a large part of the uncommitted population, either from the unorganized or the non-organized Communists.

(4) Neither side tried to or won the uncommitted

population--either organized or unorganized--to its cause. Each side, for example, has at various times seriously and unnecessarily alienated the Sects and the urban Buddhists. (Vu Van Thai believes that either could still win these groups and hence dominate, despite the "double allergy" of the population to both sides as of now).

(5) The VC are capable of making the costs increasingly high of trying to destroy them or to contain them significantly, or even of avoiding the sharp containment of the GVN. This is so especially given U.S./GVN inefficiency, and GVN failure to gain internal allies; but it would hold even if the U.S. had been, or became, far more efficient.

A more extended list of the factors in the situation leading to stalemate would also include:

Opposing the VC/DRV

(1) A strong anti-Communist faction (comparable in size to the Communists), especially active and resolute when "up against the wall." Also the RVNAF emphasis on, and effectiveness in, defense; especially given U.S. air/artillery support and ground troops.

(2) Resilience of the Vietnamese population against bombing, terrorism, refugee movement; its failure to collapse socially or to hate the U.S. (despite impact of U.S. firepower) as generally or intensely as the French.

(3) Enormity of U.S. (hence GVN) resources, compared to those of VC/DRV.

(4) U.S. view of stakes, its escalation of commitment, and hence its willingness to bear high costs.

(5) U.S. combat support and combat troops, counterbalancing those of the NVA (which, without this U.S. presence, could probably have brought victory to the VC, anytime after the development, at the latest by 1964, of a guerilla/local force/ infrastructure base adequate to support NVA operations).

Opposing the GVN/U.S.

(1) The willingness of Chinese and Soviets to supply the DRV with war material and to make good economic losses from the U.S. bombings.

(2) The inability of air interdiction to stop the (small) flow of supplies or to impose unacceptable or infeasible costs on the DRV.

(3) The DRV's confidence in success and its will to continue, even at high cost in order to prevent the destruction of the VC (at the very least), and beyond that to achieve VC dominance (a Communist South Vietnam? and to unify Vietnam?)

(4) Failure of the GVN and the U.S. to coordinate its political intelligence and to mount expert

Special Branch/police-type efforts against the Communist apparatus.

(5) The failure to reform the RVNAF/GVN or to broaden its political base.

In sum, while it is obviously not easy, if it is possible at all, for anti-Communists to win the internal war in the South, it may not be easy for them to lose it either. (This could lead to a stalemate in negotiations, as well, even if the U.S. were inclined to a "soft" position; or to paraphrase a recent remark by Charles Cooper of the Rand Corporation, it may be hard to lose at the negotiating table what we have failed to lose on the battlefield.)

(cut from here((p.32)) to p. 34. Think it's best to keep the discussion focused on the present stalemate. It's already become complicated enough for the general reader and the comparison to the French War is, as I've said earlier, rahher cryptic and sketchy, awaiting your fuller analysis. Also, the essay at this point runs the risk of breaking down into a series of extended notes.)

This view that the forces of conflict in South Vietnam have tended fairly steadily toward a violent equilibrium may be challenged with respect to two

periods: 1962-63, when it might have broken decisively in favor of the GVN "if the momentum of the strategic hamlet program could have been continued, with more U.S. support"; or in 1965, when a VC victory was believed to be imminent.

With respect to the first, Michael Arnsten argues that one can't say it was "impossible," or close to it, to defeat the Viet Cong totally in the early period, citing that:

> The VC were set back in 1962. Further, U.S. bombing, or the threat of bombing, might have worked in 1961-62 (though Arnsten argues it could hardly have been used then) to deter North Vietnam from infiltrating into South Vietnam, for they were not then as close to victory as they were in 1964-65.

In reply, I would say that the appearance of U.S. choppers and other support inevitably provided the VC with a setback; just as the appearance of U.S. troops and air support did in 1965. Moreover, it was natural for this new development--again as in 1965--to present them with a problem that would take time, at best, to solve, while making ineffective moves against it. On the other hand, in neither case were the new measures capable of destroying the VC, given its network of bases and sanctuaries.

Moreover, it should have been clear in 1962 that, given its background in 1945-54 and the leadership and support available in the North, the VC was capable of greatly expanding its organized strength, despite setbacks or the new pressures, beyond what had been seen so far. (This was also true in 1965, at least if the DRV chose to send more troops: a decision that was evident--for example, to McNamara--by at least November, 1965.)

The only real uncertainties, then, were:

(1) How much improvement the RVNAF and the GVN would make. There was much basis in past experience for negative expectations, and current evidence was available in the field--though often misrepresented--throughout 1962-63. It was also foreseeable, however, after the guidance given to Nolting and, more importantly, the installation of COMUS/MACV, that Washington would not get a realistic picture.

(2) How quickly and well the VC would learn to solve their new problems, and change their methods accordingly. Experience from 1946-54 was available on this question--for example, the effective shifts in Viet Minh tactics in 1951, followings its losses in 1950--but was perhaps not conclusive. The answer began to come in at Ap Bac in January, 1963; though we were, predictably, slow to perceive it.

If we had recognized it earlier than the following December, the VC "come-back" between July and December--not markedly aided (until the fall, at least) by the turbulence in the cities--should have been a major warning, demonstrating (as the Ia Drang Valley fighting in November, 1965 did, for McNamara) the failure of our recent measures of support and of our strategy, to achieve any lasting success.

The other main criticism of the stalemate hypothesis is that a total victory for the VC in 1965 or early 1966 was forestalled only by the arrival of large American forces and airpower. This belief is widely, almost universally, held.

Yet ~~this outcome is~~ the alternative may have been less clear than is commonly thought. Indeed, it seems to me that there is significant evidence for a contrary hypothesis: the likelihood that the Viet Cong would shortly take over completely in the South may not have been as great as we thought in 1965, given the GVN programs; nor was it much reduced by what the U.S. did do (except, perhaps, by the first 50,000-75,000 troops in 1965.) Nor were the chances of destroying the VC, or even of significantly reducing it, ever large, or apparently increased by U.S. actions.

To put the question another way, how wrong was Ambassador Taylor in wanting to avoid or postpone sending U.S. troops in early 1965. He was clearly mistaken in believing that current operations plus demonstration

bombing of the North, without U.S. forces or with only small levels of U.S. ground forces, would lead to the defeat of the V.C. But was he wrong in doubting Westmoreland's view that the GVN/ARVN effort would shortly be defeated and collapse, without a large U.S. combat presence?

Suppose Nhu, in 1963, or Minh in 1964 or others in 1965 had talked with the NLF, or the DRV, and had reached "accomodations" as we feared? Did they really, as we thought, have nothing to bargain with, to protect themselves? What kind of deal might they have gotten? How would it have differed from the best to be hoped for now?

Was ARVN in 1965 near collapse? Did ARVN commanders think so? Is it true that by 1965, the NVA could have come in (as they did, in large numbers in mid-1965, after, and in response to U.S. troops). But would they have, if we had not sent in troops and started bombing? Suppose we had retained a deterrent threat of bombing and of increasing U.S. troops, specifically against large-scale infiltration of NVA units?

Are these possible answers to these final two questions?

Without U.S. help, the non-Communist forces in South Vietnam would probably not have chosen to continue the war in support of the aims of a totally repressive policy against Communists. (U.S. help made that

acceptable to enough of them to continue.) But does that mean that otherwise they would have peacably accepted, or could not have resisted, total domination by the Communists?

There is no guarantee, of course, that there was a real or more promising course of intervention than the one we followed, and it is not implied by any of the criticisms I have made of our actual aims and policy. A number of analysts whose opinions I respect believe, and can cite evidence, that no viable political alternative has ever existed between total defeat of the Viet Cong (which many of these agree was unattainable), and, ultimately, its total Party domination of Vietnam.

Dan— you might want to point this paradox to indicate that it addresses the "Quagmire" myth "imagery"

This is what Andre Beaufre would say, for the period after 1946-47. And I would agree with him, <u>for Tonkin</u>. Yet I have a feeling he is not surely right for the Second Indochina War: that it was not, quite, impossible for some conceivable American purposes (other than the one we chose) to be achieved <u>in the South</u> in 1954 or 1957.

At the same time, I am not sure that this belief is a realistic one. It is hard for me to judge--perhaps just because I am an American--whether I have not merely <u>imagined</u> an American government that could have used the opportunities (imagined, too?) that seem, now,

to have existed in 1956: a U.S. government that "could" have acted far differently than it actually did act then, or in 1961 or 1967. It is hard, looking at one's own child, or lover, or country, to escape from a sense of hopeful possibility that an outsider has no difficulty in rejecting. And my belief that an attainable government of Vietnam, properly influenced by the U.S., had real opportunities it "could" have exploited likewise rests, I realize, largely on the judgment of certain Vietnamese such as Vu Van Thai and Hoang Van Chi who have the same problem when they look at their own country.

Our conjecture, at any rate (to be examined elsewhere) is that the same political factors in the South that have operated to stabilize a violent stalemate in war might well have worked--and might conceivably still--to enforce "coexistence" in an open political competition.

If the war was not going to end with the destruction of the VC, then either it was not going to end, ever, or there was going, someday, to be a "postwar" world in which a Communist Party would exist as a potential political (and subversive) force. Its role and influence would depend in large part on its political environment of competing organizations and popular attitudes and commitments. Its potential for support from the DRV

and for a return to terrorism or guerilla war would, presumably, always exist in some degree.

Our problem might have been formulated: "How to assure, or increase the likelihood, of a predominantly non-Communist state--or else a state not totally dominated by the Communists--despite the open, continued operation of a Communist Party?" Further, how to reduce the damage to U.S. interests if a Communist state did come into being, such as the implication and onus of military failure and of internal political failure; the killing of individuals formerly aligned with the U.S.; subversion and aggression in neighboring states; increased aggressiveness of other Communist states or third parties, and a weakening of resolve in their opponents; a prestige victory for Communist China and an expansion of its influence.

Did it, in particular, ever become beyond realistic hope for us to "win" even in somewhat less ambitious terms in Vietnam: e.g., to restrict the Viet Cong reliably, indefinitely and "cheaply"--without prolonged U.S. involvement--to a strictly subordinate political role?

I shall close by citing another ~~man's~~ general's answer, along with his judgment of opportunities foreclosed:

The general is American. So he does not make aphorisms; in fact, to a public or bureaucratic audience he talks, too often, in slogans and folksy colloquialism; but not to a friend. His views are not those of many American generals or policy-makers. He knows more about Vietnam than any of them.

"No, it wasn't too late for that, I don't think, in 1956. In '56, '57 there was a chance. By 1958 and 1959, it was getting very late: maybe, as I see it now /in 1968/, too late. But even in 1961, I thought then that there was a chance... At the same time, I can't be sure, anymore; your Frenchman just may be right, even for the South. I can't say for sure he's not."

"When, if it has, did it become finally too late for us to meet such a goal?"

"In January, 1964: with the Khanh coup. The Minh Government had some possibilities. Khanh's coup finished them. And when the Americans began to shell the villages--as they were almost bound to do--about June

of '65, that confirmed it. I knew there wasn't real hope after that."

As in the Frenchman's memory, dates overlap for this American, and for me, with harsh irony. A "last chance" for a truly favorable outcome expires at least one year before the Americans launch their combat commitment...a year and a half before the American general is called, and goes, back to Vietnam. Taking me with him.