The war in Vietnam: who's 'free'?

By EDWIN T. BURTON

American involvement in Vietnam in the early weeks of February of this year is consistent in only one sense: it has continued the mistakes of the past. The Saigon government has gained no ground on the Viet Cong, and in fact has lost some. The threat of nuclear confrontation has risen from modest to monumental proportions.

Administration statements notwithstanding, the bombing of North Vietnam brings us no closer to a settlement of the Vietnamese war. Moreover, the American military losses of the past two weeks in South Vietnam have been greater than in any previous month of the war. The deaths of eight Americans in the destroyed billet, the official motive for the U.S. air strikes, have now increased to well over 200 deaths in the brief period that followed.

If the bombings were intended to aid the Saigon government, this impression was certainly not brought to bear upon the Viet Cong. With the exception of the areas under direct military occupation by the United States, the Saigon government has little apparent control over South Vietnam.

Even American military installations, as the past two weeks have demonstrated, are not always free from the threat of the Viet Cong. Thus, without adding to the stability of the Saigon regime(s), American escalation of the war, implicit in the U.S. air raids, has once again raised the threat of nuclear war.

Rationalizing Demos

Administration-oriented columnists and rationalizing Democrats, apparently following this line of reasoning, have concluded that the escalation of the war, raising the spectre of a nuclear confrontation, may well have been an Administration motive. According to this reasoning, one of the situations might result. One of these, obviously, would be war between the United States and North Vietnam, China, or both; the other would presumably take the form of a negotiated settlement by these powers to end the Vietnam conflict.

Consider the latter possibility for a moment. It is reasonable to assume that Red China and North Vietnam will be interested in negotiating a settlement in South Vietnam, when the Viet Cong appears to be nearing virtual control over all of South Vietnam, not immediately occupied by American troops.

Would such a settlement be acceptable to the Viet Cong, even if the Chinese and North Vietnamese proved so inclined? The mobilization of Chinese forces at the Vietnam border, the installation of ground-to-air missiles in North Vietnam, the increased guerrilla activity of the Viet Cong, and the strong statements of alliances between these three groups tend to discount the possibility of such a settlement.

In addition, one need only recall that the elements backing the Viet Cong—communists as well as others—have been engaged in this struggle before the present governments of North Vietnam and Red China came into existence. It is foolish to presume that in the absence of North Vietnam and Red China the Viet Cong would cease.

V.C. Gets Little Aid

It is equally foolish to overestimate the amount of aid that the Viet Cong has received from these two countries. Contrast the role of the United States in the Saigon defense with the role of the Chinese or North Vietnamese in the Viet Cong offensives.

America has over 22,000 military 'advisors' in South Vietnam, and is currently supplying both the American and South Vietnamese military forces. The Chinese and North Vietnamese have no significant numbers of military personnel in the Viet Cong and there is little evidence of massive supplying of the Viet Cong by the Chinese and North Vietnamese.

U.S. Supplies Both

In fact, considerable evidence exists to indicate that America is actually supplying both sides. Paradoxically, we are seemingly being shot by our own guns. In any event, communist-produced supplies are not currently employed, to any significant extent, in the Vietnamese war.

Why then does it take more than 22,000 men and millions of dollars worth of supplies to support an established government against a rebel enemy that uses only those supplies which it captures from government forces and receives little tangible support from its foreign friends? Why, in fact, is the rebel group emerging victorious in this conflict in spite of apparently overwhelming odds?

War Lost

It is no secret that the Saigon government has been and is now losing to the Viet Cong at a rapid pace. Even the Administration is hard pressed to deny this situation. The hard, cold fact which the Administration has tried to brush lightly under the rug is that the Saigon government is tragically lacking even minimal popular support.

Much of the popular strength of the Viet Cong rests upon the unpopularity of the Saigon government. Failure to correct this situation is the single most outstanding failure of American policy in Vietnam since the beginning of difficulties with the rebels. Each year has increased the alienation of great blocs of the Vietnamese population from the Saigon government, to the point that the Viet Cong now commands the sympathies of most of the South Vietnamese peasantry.

It is well to remember that Viet Cong popularity hinges more upon the failures of the Saigon regimes than upon devotion to the goals of the Viet Cong. The people are far from united on the merits of the Viet Cong, but they are united in their opposition to American interference in the internal affairs of their country.

American policy has blatantly ignored this vital issue of self-determination, inherent in the current struggle.

Thus, the victories of the Viet Cong against the Saigon government are by no means astounding. They are, instead, to be expected. In this context, the bombing raids pose not only a threat to world peace, it lacks relevance to the current conflict in South Viet Nam.

Not One Inch

What, then, about the argument that America must not lose this all-important battle-ground of freedom versus Communism? This attitude assumes that the Saigon Government represents freedom and the Viet Cong communism. The former assumption clearly flies in the face of any sensible criterion of freedom for the Vietnamese people, since American aid has been used to support a government in Saigon which, to put it mildly, has been unrepresentative and oppressive.

Instead, let us rephrase the argument in terms of a struggle between a Western-oriented government — Saigon, and a communist-oriented government — the Viet Cong.

What will it take to win this type of struggle?

In America ready for a commitment to spend billions of dollars annually and employ hundreds of thousands of troops to defend a government that has proven oppressive, corrupt, and inept, and moreover, can command not even the minimal support of its population?

China Involved

On the other hand should America seize the opportunity to engage Red China in an all-out war at this time, assuming such a war is inevitable? When one contemplates the size of effort dic...
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What, then, is the motivation behind the recent bombings in North Vietnam? Presumably the next Berlin crisis will call for the bombing of Prague, or Warsaw, or perhaps Leningrad. Such thinking presupposes a rather weak-kneed attitude on the part of the Soviet Union.

Losses Not Much

Similarly, the case applies to Red China in the current struggle. The loss of a few hundred million men in a conflict with the United States on the part of the Chinese, may not be all bad from the point of view of over-populated China. In any event, there is no reason to assume weakness on their part. This type of analysis simply does not accord with the facts.

Are we then to negotiate away South Vietnam, or to surrender the country to the Viet Cong voluntarily? These are hardly pleasant choices. American horror of defeat transcends reason in the execution of foreign policy.

Lose What?

Remember that there are some things which one should not fear to lose—oppression, corruption, ignorance, to name a few. In many respects, the establishment of a government in South Vietnam which commands the support of the people of South Vietnam, is far more valuable than the perpetuation of an unresponsive, undemocratic regime, whose only merit is its anti-communist, for the present, leanings.

When one talks of defending the free world, one ought to make certain that such a world exists.