

Acheson on Our Viet Nam

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Former Secretary of State

"I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressure."

The country referred to was poor, its poverty aggravated by foreign occupation and years of warfare. Guerrillas were creating political chaos and making economic recovery impossible. The existence of the state itself was threatened by large forces supplied, organized, and led by neighboring Communist movements. Many of these forces had taken part in the struggle against foreign occupation.

The Communist leaders had previously signed an agreement for peace but had hidden their weapons and resumed the conflict at the first signs of recovery. The national military forces were unequal to the renewed, foreign aided and directed attack.

The country's government was far from any democratic ideal. Previous aid had proved inadequate. The American government had to decide whether to go further with funds, armaments, and the necessary military advisers. The President's conclusion was summed up in the sentence quoted above.

The Truman Doctrine

The year was 1947, the country Greece, the president Truman, and the policy enunciated the Truman Doctrine. It instantly received bipartisan support in Congress and for nearly 20 years, during four administrations, has been the policy of the United States. Under it necessary help was given in Greece, Turkey, Korea, Lebanon, and now in Viet Nam to prevent Communist take-over "by armed minorities or by outside pressure," or by both.

Nineteen years ago, when the policy was first adopted, the United States was in the early stages of its education in methods of Communist conquest. In the immediate postwar years it learned how,

in countries occupied by Soviet armies, Communist regimes were set up under their protection and opposition liquidated. This happened throughout Eastern Europe.

The next step was attempted in countries left in confusion by the war but not occupied by Soviet troops. Here internal subversion, instigated and supplied and controlled by outside Communist states, made an armed bid to take over the government. This was the form used in Greece and Eastern Turkey. The Truman Doctrine labeled this as aggressive Communist expansion and announced the necessity of stopping it. The aggression failed due to massive help given by the United States.

The next stage of the Communist assault did away with pretense. South Korea was openly invaded by organized army units from the Communist base outside. American and allied armed forces successfully came to the aid of South Korea.

War of Liberation

The current method of Communist expansion, employed in Viet Nam, is the so-called war of national liberation. In these wars there is an attempt, as there was in Greece, to cloak as an internal insurrection Communist subversion directed and supplied from outside, and there is added a Korea-like invasion by regular army formations from the neighboring Communist state.

Our decision to help South Viet Nam resist this attempted subjugation involves principles and policies, all of which were already public and established by 1950. They in turn resulted from an appreciation of the lessons of the 1930's—Manchuria, Ethiopia, the Rhineland, Czechoslovakia — that aggression must either be met early before it has gathered momentum or it will have to be checked later under more adverse conditions.

Same Old Complaints

The complaints now raised at protest meetings on Viet Nam are

the same which have been directed against all our efforts to aid peoples resisting Communist subjugation. Our opponents are usually praised and those we are aiding criticized.

We were told that the terrorists, guerrillas, and belligerents in Greece were patriots who had fought the Nazis and whose aim was to replace a corrupt, demoralized government; that the evidence that they were serving foreign Communist purposes was flimsy; and that the United States was intervening in a purely Greek civil

war. On the other hand, the Greek government was denounced as weak, unrepresentative of the people, particularly of the resistance, and as the creature of the western allies.

Similar unflattering comments were made about the late Syngman Rhee, president of Korea. But the fact now seems too plain for argument that in both Greece and Korea the intervention and help of the United States preserved the opportunity to develop toward democratic government by consent. No such similar development

Policy: An Asian Greece

can be noted in neighboring Balkan states or North Korea.

So, today, it is argued that government in Viet Nam is not and has not been democratic and, therefore, is unworthy of American support. But the existence of a democratic system is not the criterion of worthiness of American support. That criterion is determined and demonstrated effort in resisting attempted subjugation. Can there be more impressive evidence of such determination and effort among the people of South Viet Nam than they are now giving? For they are fighting on after suffering military and civilian casualties which on the basis of comparative populations are equal to nearly one million American casualties. Their purely military casualties on the same basis are fully ten times greater than those we suffered in Korea.

When, as in China and Cuba, a government facing Communist-led forces failed to retain the support of its people, its numerically superior forces simply melted away. But in South Viet Nam the government forces continue to grow in numbers and aggressiveness.

Not a single political figure or politically significant group in South Viet Nam at the time Diem was overthrown or since has shifted allegiance to the Viet Cong or been unwilling to continue the struggle.

Million Refugees

Finally, there is the record of those who voted with their feet, the million refugees who left the north for South Viet Nam after the Geneva accords of 1954 and the hundreds of thousands of refugees who in 1965 alone have left Viet Cong areas for government-controlled ones. The South Vietnamese people and army are fully justifying American assistance by willingly continuing to bear the brunt of what remains their struggle for independence.

Fortunately, there is also in Saigon and in Washington not only determination to suppress the beligerency, but an understanding

of the importance of political consent in furthering the struggle for independence.

In South Viet Nam, even in the midst of devastating warfare, the maneuvering and instability which have characterized the government since the fall of Diem show both a shift in power and attempts to reach the new balance by taking into account the aspirations of the Buddhists, the Catholic, the civilian politicians, the military establishment, students, the sects, and the geographic regions.

The search for such a balance is not a substitute for political method, but there has also been progress in that direction. Though it seems to have largely escaped public notice, elections for the municipal and provincial councils were held in South Viet Nam last May. Observers agree that they were conducted in a fair and orderly manner and that the candidates substantially reflected local sentiments. Over half the eligible voters were registered and over 70 per cent of those registered actually voted. In North Viet Nam there can be found, of course, no glimmering of democratic political method.

Vital to U.S.

The fate of the people of Viet Nam is of the same vital concern to the United States as that of those whom in the past we have helped to resist subjugation. Indeed the situation in Asia today is reminiscent of the problems the United States confronted in Europe in 1947. The United States faces in Communist China an aggressive nation imbued with the same primitive Communist theology which the Soviet Union had 20 years ago, and possessing (as the Soviet Union did) military resources far greater than those of her neighbors. The area to the south, afflicted by foreign occupation and years of war, offers an invitation to aggression by means of the war of national liberation. Only the United States has the resources to make resistance possible.

The Chinese Communists have made it clear that Viet Nam is another test of that strategy in Asia for the aggrandisement of the Communist world. The Communist Chinese minister of defense, Marshal Lin Piao, in a speech on September 3, referring to North America and Western Europe as the "cities of the world" and to Asia, Africa, and Latin America as the "rural areas," declared that "contemporary world revolution also presents a picture of the encirclement of cities by the rural areas." In its policy of "encirclement of the cities" Southeast Asia has the strategic significance of flanking the Indian sub-continent, facing the Philippines, and straddling the passage from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean.

With appropriate discount for verbal bluster, Communist China has shown an appreciation of the realities of power. There is surely no territory which Communist China desires more ardently than Formosa. Nevertheless, China's recognition of the vast force which the United States can bring to bear in Asia has caused the Communist leadership to refrain from attacking Formosa. The same appreciation of superior might is shown by Chinese unwillingness directly to challenge the United States in Southeast Asia.

The American aim in South Viet Nam is neither to destroy China nor North Viet Nam. It is rather to continue the policy established by President Truman of assisting free nations to resist subjugation until the Communist states become convinced that cheap victories are not possible and that the cost of aggression is too great.

The success of this policy may be seen in the growing moderation which has marked Russian policy in the past 15 years. In time China, too, may grasp the fact that aggression is unrewarding and choose to focus her energies on her vast internal problems while playing a more mature role in the international system.

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"Our decisions . . . involve principles . . ."