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Viet-Nam Today

U. Alexis Johnson
Deputy Under Secretary of State
for Political Affairs

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This pamphlet is the text of an address made by U. Alexis Johnson, Deputy Under Secretary for Political Affairs, before the New England Press Association at Boston, Mass., on January 21, 1966.

I genuinely appreciate this opportunity to discuss Viet-Nam with you this evening. The questions we face there are of such moment that they properly concern and trouble every thinking American.

As you of the press have so ably and repeatedly informed the American public, the problems we face are complex and the answers are not simple. Also, I know that you are fully conscious of the heavy burden you bear in providing a forum for

that free and public discussion necessary for an enlightened people.

I do not this evening propose to give you any pat answers, nor do I propose to try to oversimplify the problem. What I hope to do is to share with you some of my own observations and thoughts, going back to my first personal association with Viet-Nam as a member of our delegation to the Geneva conference of 1954, my conversations with the Chinese Communists in Geneva from 1954 to 1958, my service on the SEATO Council, and most recently my service in Viet-Nam. I also want to summarize briefly the broad approach your Government is taking to this problem both in Viet-Nam and in the sphere of international politics.

The question is *not* whether Viet-Nam itself, or indeed Southeast Asia as a whole, is of such political, strategic, or economic importance as to justify asking our men and women to risk their lives there.

Rather the question is the worldwide effect of permitting the Communists to breach by force *any* of the lines that were drawn in the various

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postwar settlements. The 17th parallel in Viet-Nam is just as much a part of those settlements as Checkpoint Charlie, the 38th parallel, or the northern border of Greece. The principles involved in Viet-Nam are no less important, and our national interest is just as surely involved. Though at times the outcome may have seemed in doubt in these earlier contests, the forces of freedom, with our assistance, ultimately prevailed. I am convinced that with similar patience and determination the ultimate outcome in Viet-Nam is no less certain.

The principle of self-determination is paramount. This, in fact, *is* the issue. Will countries be permitted to develop their own way without outside interference? Or shall we merely watch as they are subjected to infiltration, invasion, and terrorism by neighbors who consider them vulnerable to the technique of "wars of national liberation"? This problem is not unique to Southeast Asia, but we find it presented there today in far sharper focus than any place else in the world.

I have spoken of Southeast Asia, and not only

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of Viet-Nam, because it is a struggle that transcends the borders of Viet-Nam. Laos has long been a scene of conflict because of the unwillingness of one side to honor its solemn written word, most recently affirmed at Geneva in 1962. The official radio of Communist China has announced the formation of a group dedicated to overthrowing the ancient, proud, and independent Kingdom of Thailand, and just last week it announced the formation of a similar group to overthrow Malaysia, which so successfully defended itself against a similar attack just a few years ago. This last September 2 Lin Piao, the Peiping Minister of Defense, again assured the independent countries of Africa and Latin America that their turn will come. As a result, I am convinced that, if the challenge is not successfully met in Viet-Nam, we will pay a far higher price for at least a generation to come in seeking to meet it in Latin America, Africa, and elsewhere.

As evidence of concern over this issue by free governments all over the world, there are today over 30 countries providing assistance to Viet-Nam in a wide variety of ways. Other govern-

ments in Southeast Asia are particularly concerned and are assisting the Republic of Viet-Nam according to their capabilities. Requests of the Vietnamese Government have brought responses from Australia, New Zealand, and the Republic of Korea, which has now sent a full division of ground forces. And the newly elected President of the Philippines has said that he is considering sending Philippine combat forces to Viet-Nam. I am sure that the present, diplomatic effort will produce additional assistance from yet other countries.

HISTORICAL REVIEW

Let me briefly recall to you the events in Southeast Asia following the Geneva agreement of 1954. North Viet-Nam hoped it would be able, through rigged elections, to bring the South under its sway in 1956. Being frustrated in this design and working from the theory that the problems of governing a truncated South Viet-Nam would prove insurmountable, Hanoi prepared to capitalize on the anticipated political and economic disintegration of the South.

As early as 1956 Hanoi undertook to rebuild, reorganize, and expand the covert military machine that was left behind in South Viet-Nam at the time the Viet Minh supposedly withdrew in 1954. Southerners who had moved to the North were given intensive training and political indoctrination, and returned to the South as cadres. Covert supply lines were established, for the most part passing through the eastern portion of Laos near the demilitarized zone. This, in part, explains the intense interest and sensitivity toward this portion of Laos that has consistently been displayed by Hanoi. By 1959 Hanoi was ready to embarrass and raise doubts about the ability of the Saigon Government to maintain internal order by stepping up what had up to then been small-scale guerrilla actions. This was intensified in 1960.

Frustrated in their hopes of a cheap and easy victory, in that year the Communist regime in the North made some far-reaching decisions which they made no effort to conceal. The record in their own words is clear for all to read.

At the Third Lao Dong (Communist) Party

Congress in Hanoi in September 1960, Ho Chi Minh said that the North must "step up the national democratic people's revolution in the South." Other similar speeches were made, and at its conclusion the Party Congress called for the formation of a "National United Front" in the South. Three months later, that is in December 1960, Hanoi radio announced the formation of a "Front for Liberation of the South." This is the origin of the so-called "National Liberation Front" in South Viet-Nam. It was then and still is a pure creature and tool of the North Vietnamese regime. Its so-called leadership contains not a single nationally known figure. In a true sense it is as faceless to the outside world as it is to the Vietnamese people. Thus it is not a "national front," and it is certainly not a "liberation front" for its purpose has nothing to do with "liberation"—quite the opposite.

The formation of a purely political "liberation front" might have been manageable, flagrant interference though it was in the internal affairs of another state, but the Hanoi regime by no means

confined itself to the political realm. On the contrary, its major effort was in the military realm and by the end of 1961 had assumed the scale of a full-fledged armed attack. From 1961 through the first 9 months of 1965, about 7,500 civilians were assassinated by the Viet Cong; while about 36,500 were kidnaped. This Viet Cong terror has had as its chief target civilians working in the countryside to enlarge the economic and social horizons of the Vietnamese peasants, such as teachers and district officials. Just this past week Viet Cong terrorists massacred 33 men, women, and children and wounded 54 others in a brutal sweep through a refugee settlement south of Da Nang.

Through the years Hanoi increased the numbers of both men and arms it sent into the South and, as the supply of southern-born personnel was depleted, turned to the use of Northerners from the regular forces. In some cases they were sent as cadre and in other cases full units were moved in, such as regiments of the 325th Division and other regular units which are now stationed in the highland area of South Viet-Nam.

MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS

Such a campaign would face any government with difficulties. It is hardly surprising that this young government, just beginning to get on its feet, was taxed beyond its limits and asked for further outside help.

Although the Vietnamese forces themselves could readily have dealt with any genuinely indigenous guerrilla movement, they found themselves increasingly unable to deal with the growing invasion from the North.

After long and careful consideration the United States agreed to respond to a Vietnamese request for increased assistance to defend South Viet-Nam against the attack it was undergoing. This was done in an exchange of letters between President Kennedy and President Dien in December 1961.

The Vietnamese Armed Forces have more than doubled, increasing from 247,000 in 1960 to over 565,000 today, and though 12,000 a month are coming into the armed forces, the ratio of Government forces to the VC forces is about 3 to 1, although in previous antiguerrilla actions in Malaya, Greece, and the Philippines a ratio of at

least 10 or 15 to 1 has been found necessary. (I might note at this point that few people seem to know that the great majority of the armed forces of the Vietnamese Government consists of volunteers and that, of those now coming into the regular forces, about 60 percent are volunteers.) The ceiling on Vietnamese ability to increase their forces is thus not so much men willing to fight for their country as it is the necessarily slow process of training; especially training leadership. That they were willing to fight for their country is well demonstrated by the fact that since 1960 the Armed Forces have suffered about 115,000 casualties, of which approximately 34,000 were killed in action—11,000 during this past year. This is a loss ratio, in terms of the numbers of men engaged, very considerably above our own losses in World War II and Korea.

However, there has been an obvious gap in manpower, and in the spring of last year Viet-Nam asked for, and we agreed to begin, the introduction of American ground forces, especially to deal with this problem of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese main force units, that is, their

regular forces, which operate for the most part in battalions and regiments rather than as guerrillas. Even though Australia, New Zealand, and Korea have also introduced ground forces, the overwhelming weight of manpower is still that of the Vietnamese, and the role of U.S. and other non-Vietnamese forces is that of support to the main Vietnamese effort. For both we and the Vietnamese full well realize that the main effort must continue to be that of the Vietnamese themselves.

Another aspect of the military strategy has been the air action against North Viet-Nam initiated and carried on by the Vietnamese and ourselves since last February as a response to the escalation of Hanoi's military actions in the South and as a complement to the main theater of action in the South. Our action consisted of a careful, precise, and restrained application of air power against military targets and military lines of communication in North Viet-Nam. It has not been directed at the civilian population of North Viet-Nam, but at the means by which their rulers are attempting to support their aggression in the South. It is not directed at the destruction of North Viet-

Nam, but rather at the will and ability of the leaders in Hanoi to continue their aggression. While retribution or revenge is not its purpose, many of the people of South Viet-Nam feel that it is small repayment for the sabotage and destruction of thousands of bridges, and miles of road and railroad, and the tens of thousands of victims, military and civilian, inflicted on them over the years by Hanoi's agents. As you know, this bombing has been suspended since December 24th in still another major effort to open the door to a peaceful settlement.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

However, both the Vietnamese and ourselves fully realize that this struggle and our response is and can be by no means purely military. The same as any underdeveloped country, Viet-Nam faces staggering problems of governmental organization, education, the development of transportation, communications, power, and industry, development of agriculture, and so on almost ad infinitum. Even though the military part of our cooperation has since 1960 become the larger and

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more dramatic aspect of our programs, increasing sums are being devoted to what are broadly known as economic programs.

This description is all too narrow for it covers not only what are generally known as economic projects but also such things as medicine—ranging from medical education and hospitals to American doctors working in provincial hospitals—an Institute of Public Administration, improvement and strengthening of the civil police, thousands of schoolrooms, radio broadcast stations, printing equipment, radio communication equipment for isolated villages, and so on. Very importantly it also covers the very large gap between what Viet-Nam exports and what it must import. This, together with able Vietnamese financial management, has thus far prevented any serious inflation.

School enrollment has continued to increase so that in 1965 approximately 2 million students were enrolled in schools through university as compared with just over 1.3 million in 1960. Equally significant, we have, for example, with

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assistance from Australia and the Republic of China, produced some 8½ million school textbooks written in Vietnamese by Vietnamese educators. By the end of this year, 14 million texts will have been distributed—at least four books for each child in school.

On other fronts, the industrial production index rose 32 percent between 1962 and 1964. New hospitals are being built in the provinces. Under a land reform program begun in 1957 some 600,000 acres of farmland have been distributed to 115,000 farmers, and this last fall Prime Minister Ky inaugurated a new phase in the program which will distribute a further 650,000 acres to some 180,000 farmers. Per capita food production, which dropped 10 percent between 1955 and 1960 in North Viet-Nam, rose by 20 percent in the South during the same period.

Thus, though their major energies are understandably involved in the military effort, Vietnamese Governments have, within the limits of their capabilities, been making some progress in other fields as well.

POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Now a word with regard to political developments. Viet-Nam faces problems common to every newly independent country, especially lack of trained personnel. The problems and responsibilities of independence are compounded in Viet-Nam by the diversity of racial groups such as the Khmers, Chams, Nungs, and the so-called mountain people who, in addition to the Vietnamese, make up the country.

Regional differences—between the Southerners, the Northerners, and the people of the Center—add to the already complicated picture. There is also the unfortunate fact that political and religious lines among the population tend to coincide so that what are essentially political problems assume a religious coloration.

To these problems, normal to a developing country, must be added the formidable difficulty of caring for the thousands of civilian victims of the terrorism directed from Hanoi and the hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing Viet Cong rule. The dramatic exodus of almost 1 million people from the North to the South following the 1954 agreement provided a vivid example of the

true sentiments many of the North Vietnamese people, even though it signaled the beginning of the refugee problem which has continued to challenge the Government.

I am personally convinced that the great mass of the population do not want to live under the Viet Cong, and when their security is assured, they will in large part support the Government and its program. In spite of all the undoubted imperfections of the Saigon Government, people have found that it is far preferable to that of the Viet Cong. The harsh realities of Viet Cong rule have meant higher taxes, closing of schools, drafting of young boys, being cut off from traditional market centers, and, in general, more severe conditions of life. The hundreds of thousands of people who have recently left their homes in Viet Cong occupied areas to accept the hardships of becoming refugees dramatically demonstrate the way many people in the South feel about the Viet Cong. As another example twice in the past 4 months the Viet Cong radio has made unprecedented appeals for an hour of silence and a general strike in the cities of South

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Viet-Nam. The total lack of any response whatsoever demonstrated that the so-called "Liberation Front" has little support from people not under the grip of its terror.

There is also one essential fact to remember when reading of developments in Saigon. Neither at the time Diem was overthrown nor since has there been a single political figure, or a single group having political significance, that has gone over to the Viet Cong or even suggested the fight should be given up. Thus, whatever ideological appeal the Viet Cong may have had at one time, it has largely disappeared under the harsh realities of Viet Cong rule.

We Americans know how long it takes and how much trial and error is involved in developing firmly based democratic institutions. The Vietnamese have not had much time, and even less opportunity. Signs of greater political maturity are appearing, and I have no doubt that they will continue to increase, but their full development will take time, and there is little that the kibitzing outsider can do to force their pace.

I am reminded of the determination displayed

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by an Asian student in a letter to one of my staff. The student, undaunted by the frustrations of learning English, wrote, "Slow by slow, in the long of time, we will success."

As in every country, soundly developed democracy must build upward from what are called the "rice roots" in that part of the world. This process is under way in Viet-Nam. In hamlets freed from Viet Cong control, elections are held for hamlet councils. At the higher level, elections were held just this last May for municipal and provincial councils. In the face of VC efforts at their sabotage, these elections were conducted throughout the country in a most orderly manner and popular interest was high.

Last Saturday [January 15] Prime Minister Ky announced that by next month work will be completed on organizing a body to work out a draft constitution and a draft of laws for the organization of political parties. This draft is to be submitted to a people's referendum by October of this year, and national elections are to be organized not later than October 1967. Thus, progress is continuing.

RESTORING PEACE TO VIET-NAM

This brings us to the final great question as to how peace is to be restored in this war-torn land. That peace will come is a certainty. How it will come, I cannot speak with certainty for I can speak only from the standpoint of one side, and it takes two to make peace unless the struggle is to be carried to its ultimate conclusion. This latter way is one possibility. With the determination of the Vietnamese people and the ascending scale of help that is now being brought to their support, Hanoi and the Viet Cong can have no hope of victory. The time for that has now passed. If they choose to continue the struggle and are able to maintain the morale of their forces, they can undoubtedly prolong their final defeat for a long time. But Hanoi is making a very mistaken calculation if it assumes that those opposing them will not be willing to make the sacrifice. The spirit of the common citizen of South Viet-Nam, including the million who fled from the tyranny of the North is not easily broken. Nor are the American people accustomed lightly to withdrawing from

any enterprise they may undertake. This determination is shared by the other nations who are sharing in the military task.

The alternative is for Hanoi to recognize either explicitly or implicitly that its present course is futile and, indeed, to give attention to the rebuilding of its own nation. No demands on Hanoi for indemnity or revenge have been made by Viet-Nam or the United States. All that has been asked is that it leave its neighbors alone.

I will not this evening attempt to detail the efforts that have been made over the years, specifically going back to President Kennedy's meeting with Khrushchev in Vienna in June 1961 down through our present efforts, to find some way of arriving at a just and peaceful settlement for South Viet-Nam. Suffice it to say that our commitment in Southeast Asia is clear. However, there are a few basic facts that all those who discuss this problem need to keep in mind:

1. Hanoi's announced objective of imposing its will by force on South Viet-Nam has been backed by tens of thousands of trained and armed men, units of the regular North Vietnamese army.

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It is this external aggression which is responsible for the presence of U.S. combat forces. I would remind those who allege that somehow our assistance to Viet-Nam is responsible for the difficulties that country faces that at the time in 1960 that Hanoi began the introduction of forces into South Viet-Nam there was not a single American combat soldier in the country.

2. We are not aware of any initiative which has been taken by Hanoi during the past 5 years to seek peace in Southeast Asia. All reports of "peace feelers" have inevitably turned out to be initiatives being taken by third parties. Hanoi has categorically denied that it has ever made any "peace feelers," and I can assure you that we ourselves know of none.

3. Hanoi has consistently insisted that its four points must be accepted as the sole basis for peace in Viet-Nam. The third of those four points required the imposition of Hanoi's program—that is, the program of the so-called "Liberation Front"—upon South Viet-Nam, whether the South Vietnamese want it or not.

On the other side of the picture, not only has

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the U.S. Government made numberless efforts to achieve peaceful settlement, or, at a minimum, get negotiations of some kind underway, but many other governments have sought to achieve at least the beginning of negotiations. All of these efforts have been categorically and rudely rebuffed by Hanoi and Peiping.

The following statements are on the public record about elements which the United States believes can go into a peace in Southeast Asia:

1. The Geneva agreements of 1954 and 1962 are an adequate basis for peace in Southeast Asia;
2. We would welcome a conference on South-east Asia or on any part thereof;
3. We would welcome "negotiations without preconditions" as the 17 neutral nations put it;
4. We would welcome unconditional discussions as President Johnson put it;
5. A cessation of hostilities could be the first order of business at a conference or could be the subject of preliminary discussions;
6. Hanoi's four points could be discussed along with other points which others might wish to propose;

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7. We want no U.S. bases in Southeast Asia;
8. We do not desire to retain U.S. troops in South Viet-Nam after peace is assured;
9. We support free elections in South Viet-Nam to give the South Vietnamese a government of their own choice;

10. The question of reunification of Viet-Nam should be determined by the Vietnamese through their own free decision;

11. The countries of Southeast Asia can be nonaligned or neutral if that be their option;

12. We would much prefer to use our resources for the economic reconstruction of Southeast Asia than in war. If there is peace, North Viet-Nam could participate in a regional effort to which we would be prepared to contribute at least \$1 billion;

13. The President has said, "The Viet Cong would not have difficulty being represented and having their views represented if for a moment Hanoi decided she wanted to cease aggression. I don't think that would be an insurmountable problem."

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14. We have said publicly and privately that we could stop the bombing of North Viet-Nam as a step toward peace although there has not yet been the slightest hint or suggestion from the other side as to what they would do if the bombing stopped.

However, there is one thing that we have not said; we have not said that we will surrender South Viet-Nam to the Communists. To put this in the words of the President before the Congress last week: "The days may become months, and the months may become years, but we will stay as long as aggression commands us to battle." In this I feel that the President has the support of the overwhelming mass of the American people. If this is clearly understood by Hanoi, peace can quickly come. If it is not yet understood, the struggle will be longer and harder, but nevertheless peace inevitably will come. The choice of whether the time is to be long or short is up to Hanoi.

I am sure you join in my hope that Hanoi will not much longer delay in making the right choice.

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