
Unthinking the thinkable

By Ronald Steel

In the April 30th issue of *Book Week*, that master storyteller of the unthinkable, Herman Kahn, penned a just-suppose scenario of what might have happened if President Johnson had not chosen to bomb North Vietnam or send an American army to defend the regime in Saigon. The war effort of our friends in the South, he states, would have collapsed by early 1965, and the two severed parts of Vietnam would have been joined—perhaps under the guise of the elections originally set for 1956. This united Vietnam would, we are told, be prepared to “settle scores” with its neighbors, all of whom would have to “accommodate” to Ho Chi Minh. Laos and Cambodia would accommodate or be absorbed, while Thailand, already faced with insurgency in the northeast, would be forced to call on American troops, or else, being a nation “which throughout its history has not been known for policy consistency at the price of self-destruction, would have changed sides.” As the falling dominoes (now apparently back in favor after a long post-Dulles disgrace) gather momentum, Malaysia would be squeezed between Communist Vietnam and Sukarno’s “fellow-traveling” (an old McCarthy word now revived) Indonesia. Leftists around the world would ask Vietnam and China “how to do it,” and even the Russians might be tempted to pursue more extreme tactics.

Thus, for want of Marshal Ky, all of Southeast Asia would follow the unscrupulous Thais and choose self-preservation over policy consistency. The American military foothold on the mainland of Asia would be lost, pro-Western governments would turn to neutralism, or even worse, an accommodation with the Communists, and the stage would be set for a tragedy even greater than the one that followed the refusal of Britain and France to oppose Hitler’s reoccupation of the Rhineland. The analogy may be far-fetched, but Herman Kahn suggests that Ho Chi Minh can be compared to Hitler (presumably North Vietnam is bent on dominating the world like Nazi Germany), and the determination of the West to prevent the unification of Vietnam is an act of wisdom that will allow us to escape World War III. The road may be long and tough, there may be many who complain of the sacrifices, but our cause is just, and by saving the nations of Southeast Asia from an “accommodation” with a Communist Vietnam, we may be sparing the world something even worse.

It is all so very persuasive that one can only marvel that there are those who still do not understand that Ho Chi Minh is Hitler, that South Vietnam and Thailand must remain as American bases, that the neutralization

of Southeast Asia would be a tragedy, that the defeat of the Vietcong (or is it North Vietnam?) will mean the disappearance of guerrilla movements everywhere in the world, that the sacrifice of American lives for the regime of Marshal Ky is noble and worthy, and that the steady escalation of the Vietnam war is really a clever way of avoiding a Third World War—even if it should happen to bring one on.

Such a scenario must have been persuasive to President Johnson in late 1964 when—following his election on a promise not to expand the Vietnam war—he pondered whether to expand it to save the Saigon regime from collapse. But instead of proposing the above scenario of falling dominoes, suppose that Herman Kahn, or someone else of his prestige with access to the White House, had suggested to the President what might happen if he did, in fact, try to prop up the Saigon

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regime with American soldiers. To those pondering the wisdom of a direct American military intervention, such a scenario might have been sobering, and might even have led them to question the wisdom of a massive American commitment to Saigon. They might have drawn upon the experience of the French in Indochina,† and also have been more inclined to make a cold calculation of just how threatening a Vietcong victory might be to American interests.

Such a scenario might run something like this:

The 20,000 American “advisers” in South Vietnam at the end of 1964 would have to be augmented by huge reinforcements of several hundred thousand, or perhaps even half a million, men. Only an effort on the scale of Korea could halt the Vietcong tide before it overwhelmed the indifferent South Vietnamese army. Once such an American army entered the field, however, the National Liberation Front would call on Hanoi for volunteers, who would be infiltrated across the border. The entry of North Vietnamese units into the war would, in turn, require more American troops, and perhaps necessitate the withdrawal of some units from troubled spots such as Germany. Short on manpower, the United States might find itself spread thin in other areas of concern. This could invite new instability in places closer to home than Vietnam.

In Vietnam the American forces, possessing massive fire power and an enormous technological superiority, would try to destroy the Communist rebels by air-supported land operations. In addition, the President would be under pressure to expand the air war to North Vietnam. This would be justified as a means of slowing down infiltration, and of persuading Hanoi to withdraw her support of the Vietcong. Air raids against the North would cause considerable hardship, but would not be able to paralyze the war effort of such a technologically unsophisticated society. The bombing might even harden the resistance of the North Vietnamese. The war in the South, fought from both land and air, would inflict

grave losses upon the Communist rebels, but it would also devastate the countryside and take a heavy toll of the civilian population. This, in turn, would create sympathy for the Vietcong and increased opposition to the Western "invaders."

As American casualties mounted, there would be growing pressure from the military, supported by elements in Congress, and with the acquiescence of a war-

†In his brilliant study of France's eight-year war against the Communist-led Vietnamese rebels, *The Quicksand War: Prelude to Vietnam* (Atlantic/Little Brown, 372 pp., \$7.95), Lucien Bodard writes: "Against the infiltrating Viet battalions the French high command mounted the first big mopping-up operation in the delta: but this was real war, a huge, heavy, soldier's operation . . . Now it was really the army against the people—the ponderous, massive army carrying out combined operations with all its fire power and all that was needed to crush opposition by weight of equipment . . . It all seemed easy—unnaturally easy. But it was not. It was wretchedly, distastefully hard, and it called for an unvarying monotonous cruelty. For there was no coming to an end of these regulars mingled with the ordinary people: they might have been indestructible . . . Day after day, millions of men, women and children were forced to live under the threat of death, to live with bombs dropping all around: thus they took to hating the French, and sided with the Viet regulars for good and all." Bodard's book is a magnificent achievement that puts the tragedy of France's war in Indochina into new focus, and sheds a good deal of light on the situation confronting the Americans who have taken over France's role. Written with the emotional force of a novel and the immediacy of superior journalism, *The Quicksand War* is not only required reading for anyone interested in the origins of the Vietnam war, but a fascinating study of military courage in the service of political blindness. In recounting the heroism, the tragedy, and the waste of the French war in Indochina, Bodard also tells us a good deal about ourselves.

wary American public, to extend the bombing to civilian targets. The intensified bombing of North Vietnam would oblige the Russians to step up their aid to Hanoi, particularly of jet fighters and anti-aircraft missiles. But as the devastation of North Vietnam increased, they might feel compelled to supply Hanoi with the means to strike at American bases in the South, such as Pleiku, Danang, and Cam Ranh Bay. This would, in all likelihood, bring about a direct Russo-American confrontation of the kind that could escalate into a total war. Even if the American bases remained untouched, the inability to end the war by increased bombing would eventually lead to calls for an invasion of North Vietnam. While this would not end the guerrilla war in the South, it would provide a temporary relief valve for American frustrations. It might be difficult for a President who had carried the war to this point to resist such expansion, particularly if the climate of stalemate continued until the 1968 electoral campaign. In a gamble to end the war he might order an American invasion of North Vietnam, beginning first with a probe into the demilitarized zone in order to establish the "no sanctuary" principle, and then probably an amphibious Inchon-type landing.

In the face of such a desperate situation the North Vietnamese, despite their long-standing fear and distrust of China, would be compelled to call upon their northern neighbor to resist the American invasion. Having lost nearly everything, they would have little more to lose by a Chinese counter-intervention. Even without an appeal from Hanoi, the leaders in Peking would not tolerate an American army on their frontier, and would move

south—just as they did in the Korean war when MacArthur's troops approached the Yalu. This would, of course, be very risky for China, for it would furnish the United States with the pretext to destroy Chinese nuclear installations. But the threat posed by American troops in North Vietnam, and the hope that the Russians, in the final analysis, would be drawn into the conflict and thereby pose a deterrent to an American nuclear attack on China, would probably overcome such Chinese hesitations. At this point one of three things could happen: either the Russians would stand by and allow America to destroy China's industrial and nuclear capacity, in which case Moscow would suffer a serious loss of prestige; or fear of Russian reprisal would deter the United States from attacking China, in which case there would be a Korean-type war in which many thousands of Americans would be killed; or else Washington would call Moscow's hand, and we would be in World War III.

Even if President Johnson were to resist the invasion of North Vietnam, and thereby avoid a dangerous process of escalation, the American aerial devastation of a relatively defenseless Communist nation would make it increasingly difficult for Russian leaders to pursue the policy of detente with the United States. Those who ignored the pleas of North Vietnam would likely be replaced by more militant leaders. This, in turn, would help repair the breach between Russia and China and confront the West with something it has not faced for more than a decade: a united Communist bloc. A more militant Russian leadership would also be induced to take the pressure off North Vietnam by opening up "second fronts" in various trouble spots throughout the world. Having committed the bulk of its forces to Vietnam, the United States would find it exceedingly difficult to counter such threats, and could suffer a serious loss to its own vital interests.

The Russians would also be induced to aid guerrilla movements in Latin America (Continued on page 8)

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and Africa, hoping to start miniature Vietnams in such places as Bolivia and Peru, knowing that the United States could not commit its own forces to a half-dozen wars of "national liberation." Even without help from the Russians, such guerrilla movements would draw new encouragement from the lesson of Vietnam. It would prove to these revolutionaries that even the most powerful nation in the world, using the most terrible weapons of modern technology, was incapable of stamping out a determined guerrilla movement against a government which had

lost popular support. The awesome power of the United States, once having been brought into operation and found wanting, would no longer serve as a deterrent to Marxist-inspired revolutionaries. The American intervention in Vietnam would, in this sense, stimulate exactly the kind of war it was ostensibly designed to discourage.

Aside from the dangers outlined above, a massive American military intervention in Vietnam would cause grave tensions within the United States itself. It would sharply divide the electorate, many of whom would be incapable of believing that the

enforced partition of Vietnam merited the sacrifice of so many American lives. It would alienate much of the intellectual community, which has hitherto generally accepted the ideological assumptions of the cold war. It would lead to a crisis of conscience among young Americans, some of whom would refuse to fight for a cause they considered unjust, and many of whom would become cynical about the purposes of a government which called upon them to die for a foreign military dictatorship in the name of democracy.

Also, as the cost of the war increased, Congress would no longer be willing to provide funds for many of the Great Society programs, and the least privileged members of American society—particularly the Negroes—would suffer and feel themselves to be betrayed. Their bitterness would mount, and be reflected in increased militancy and racial tensions that would further divide Americans from one another. As the war progressed and the elemental emotions of patriotism mounted, opposition would become increasingly impolitic, public officials would be silent, dissent would be equated with treason, and a new round of McCarthyism would be likely. Finally, the democratic consensus which makes possible the remarkable stability of American politics would be threatened by ideological extremism on both Right and Left. Third, and even fourth, parties would spring up, and the United States would be rocked by social, political, and racial tensions that could shred the fabric of American democracy.

While the above scenario might have seemed fanciful in the fall of 1964, we know better today. The cost of defending the regime in Saigon from other Vietnamese has already taken a terrible toll of American lives and American prestige, not to mention the lives of Vietnamese who happen to be the pawns in this proxy war with China. To those who believe that Ho Chi Minh is Hitler and Vietnam the Rhineland, there can be no question about the wisdom of such

sacrifices. But others, less persuaded by such dubious historical allusions, may wonder—at this half-way point in our hypothetical scenario—whether the defense of Marshal Ky and the prevention of Laos and Cambodia from an “accommodation” with a united Vietnam are causes that justify the expenditure of such blood, and the courting of the even greater dangers that lie ahead. ❁