

Ted Kennedy on

By Senator Edward M. Kennedy

(The following is an abridgment of Senator Kennedy's despairing look at the Saigon situation as related in his recent speech to the World Affairs Council of Boston.)

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One left Saigon in 1965 feeling things were going to get better, simply because they could not get worse. I left with the hope that some real progress was on the horizon. On my return this year from Vietnam, I am forced to report that continued optimism cannot be justified. I found that the kind of war we are fighting in Vietnam will not gain our long-range objectives; that the pattern of destruction we are creating can only make a workable political future more difficult; and that the government we are supporting has given us no indication it can win the confidence of its own people.

Some in Luxury, Some in Tombs

Saigon has grown over the past three years by almost two million people. The contrasts there are painful. A small, privileged segment of Vietnamese society is thriving. But those who have been driven in from the countryside and must now live in the streets and the hovels present a different picture. Vietnam is a nation in which reverence for the dead is the highest trait of character. Yet I saw people in Saigon who are forced to live in graveyards, and have even hollowed out tombs to find shelter. This is a city where thousands of young men 16 and 19 years old flash about the streets on their motorbikes, wearing cowboy hats and leather gloves, exempt from the war. Yet this is also a city where 40 per cent of the death toll is accounted for by children under two years of age, children killed primarily by dysentery or pneumonia.

From the air, Vietnam is a beautiful land, but when you descend from the sky you see clearly the pockmarks of war, and when you walk through the villages you see the ravages of war in the faces of the sick and wounded children.

I had the opportunity to visit more than 25 refugee camps and talk to hundreds of their people. We tend to think of refugees as a small minority of people who have been caught in a passing conflict. But when I discuss the refugees

in Vietnam, I am talking about literally 25 per cent of that nation's population, all of whom are disaffected, all of whom hold a strong resentment for whatever side tore them away from the simplicity of their lives to the squalor and the bureaucracy of the camps. I found a great deal of resentment toward the United States among these people. The vast majority—I would judge over 80 per cent—claimed they were either deposited in camps by the Americans or fled to camps in fear of American airplanes and artillery. Only a handful claimed they were driven from their homes by the Viet Cong. The French, one leader told me, committed many sins in Vietnam. But the French did not wipe out their villages, or burn down their homes, or herd them into enclosures.

One further impression—and perhaps the strongest and most depressing—is the impression of the Viet Cong themselves. The Viet Cong are driven by a belief in the rightness of their cause that comes from years of colonial rule and injustice inflicted by passing governments. This belief has grown strong on a sense of nationalism carefully nurtured and by communist political cadres. It is true that their forces have been depleted by our weapons; in the Delta, we are capturing 14 and 15 year old boys. But it is just as true that in the past six months there has been more enemy activity in that area than there was when the Viet Cong were at the height of their strength. I believe the people we are fighting for do not fully have their hearts in the struggle.

We are losing 9,000 lives and spending \$30 billion a year. But Saigon—faced with an enemy which controls more than half of its land area—has yet to declare a state of national mobilization. Half of the American boys fighting in Vietnam are draftees. But in Saigon, it is common knowledge that a young man can buy his way out of the draft, or if he is in service can buy his release.

Indifference to Civilian Victims

South Vietnam's civilians who have been injured as a result of the war are victims of the same lack of concern. Each year 150,000 civilians are wounded in the war, and more than 25,000 are killed. Only 150 Vietnamese doctors are available to treat these civilian casualties, and they must also serve the entire population of over 13 million. And yet I learned, in discussions with

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members of the government, that they plan to divert many of this meager number by drafting more doctors into the military.

I say that most of the official in Saigon do not care about these stricken people; that they are most interested in maintaining their own positions of power than in helping the victims of the war.

Along with this lack of urgency and this indifference toward the enemy and toward its own people, the government of South Vietnam is infested as well with corruption. Government jobs are bought and paid for by people seeking a return on their investments. Police accept bribes. Officials and their wives run operations in the black market. AID funds and hospital supplies are diverted into private pockets.

If negotiations are not forthcoming, or if they face a great edlay, we must ask ourselves whether the gains we can achieve are worth the staggering costs we now incur. American officials I talked to in Vietnam are emphatic that we must not expect too much from the central government, and that we cannot hope for an end to our involvement for another five or ten years. It is easy to accept five to ten years in the abstract, but it becomes more difficult when years are translated into dollars—another \$150 to \$300 billion at the current level of spending. And I find it impossible to talk of our future in Vietnam in terms of another 50,000 to 100,000 young Americans dead.

I believe that if we cannot achieve negotiations in the very near future, we should begin immediately to moderate significantly our military activities in South Vietnam to levels more tolerable to all and more commensurate with our limited aims. Our overriding goal should be to maximize the safety and security of the Vietnamese people and our own soldiers, rather than to search out the enemy in his territory.

We can have an enormous influence over the government of South Vietnam if only we choose to use it. They know that if we were not there they would collapse. But today many of their officials believe that, because of our fear of China and of our deep concern about communist advances in Southeast Asia, we are tied to Vietnam irrevocably. As a result, I believe they feel they can act as they wish towards the war and towards their own people.