

Wheat and bullets

If my country, having sold wheat on the cheap to Russia and China, denies South Vietnam the bullets to defend herself against Communist conquest, I shall continue to love my country, but I shall love it in shame and sadness, not in pride.

The Vietnamese do not ask Americans to give more of their blood. They ask only for bullets. Their cause may be hopeless. But as long as they are willing to fight for their cause, a cause we once professed to believe in, for God's sake we shouldn't let it be said that we refused them the means to fight.

There are senators who think otherwise. They say it's all right to break our pledge of aid to the South Vietnamese because their government is corrupt.

Very well, there's corruption. But it is fair to demand that the Vietnamese, new to self-government and fighting for survival, should pause in the middle of a war and create a model democracy before they are worthy of our help?

We didn't ask that of our World War II allies, including Russia. We are not yet a model democracy ourselves.

The senators say there's another reason why we shouldn't send aid. It's purely a Vietnamese conflict and they must settle it themselves. Are the senators really that blind?

Henry Kissinger's prize-winning ceasefire agreement restricted our aid to South Vietnam. It placed no restriction at all on the flow of Russian and Chinese arms to North Vietnam.

Those arms have been flowing without letup. An intelligence summary from a neutral source, by no means enamored of the Saigon regime, offers this assessment:

Since the ceasefire the North Vietnamese have re-equipped and brought back to full strength all their divisions in the south. They have reactivated 12 former U.S. air-rips in the south, 10 capable of handling

Russian-built jet fighters. They have built a formidable anti-aircraft network of radar-controlled 37 mm guns reaching within 100 miles of Saigon.

Perhaps most important, they now have an all-weather road running from the old DMZ to near Saigon. This allows them to continue moving supplies during the monsoon season, when the weather often grounds the South Vietnamese air force.

It goes without saying — certainly the senators never mention it — that these are violations of the ceasefire agreement. But more than that, this buildup could not happen without help from Russia and China, who do not share the senators' willingness to let the Vietnamese settle their differences themselves.

The Vietnamese are wonderful people, alert, lively, energetic. It would be a shame if they threw off the yoke of colonialism only to fall under the yoke of Communism. As long as that hasn't happened, there is reason to hope that they will eventually find a happy way to govern themselves. But if the great iron lid clangs shut on them, they won't get another chance to choose.

To me that's what the struggle in Vietnam is all about — not power politics or global strategy, but a brave and charming people who deserve better than trading one tyranny for another.

Listen to these poignant words:

"I have asked the U.S. leaders for a straight answer. Is it Yes or No? Are you going to give us what we need? Will you shoulder your responsibility ... Yes or No? If your answer is No, then we have nothing more to say. On our part, we will certainly never surrender to the Communists. We would rather fight to the last bullet and the last grain of rice than surrender to them."

That was President Thieu, the terrible Thieu, the man we won't help because his hands aren't spotless, telling his people of the predicament in which we have left them, while we sold wheat on the cheap to our virtuous new friends in Moscow and Peking.