

NYTimes APR 8, 1975

Why We Failed In Vietnam

By Tom Wicker

DALLAS, April 7—The indomitable Walt W. Rostow, once President Johnson's Henry Kissinger and now a professor at the University of Texas, believes South Vietnam might yet be rescued from collapse if the United States invaded North Vietnam.

He suggested to The Dallas Times Herald the other day that one American option was to "put ashore two Marine divisions at some strategic point in North Vietnam and with them hold a perimeter until the North Vietnamese agree to honor the 1973 accords."

Mr. Rostow is out of power now, and entitled to his views as a private citizen. There would be no need to remark upon these views except that they suggest the extent to which even people so well-informed as he continue to believe that American involvement in Southeast Asia primarily demands an effective military strategy.

In the present crisis, if South Vietnam is to survive at all, a military stand does have to be made somewhere. Beyond that, however, if there is to be an independent and non-Communist South Vietnam, it will have to be based upon something other than American military support—or the kind of external military diversion suggested by Mr. Rostow.

Yet, to hear President Ford and Secretary of State Kissinger tell it—though neither has proposed anything so drastic as an invasion of the North

IN THE NATION

—the major problem is still military, still one of propping up South Vietnam by force of arms.

Except for Congressional actions forbidding either course, the Administration might even have resorted once again to the use of American troops or bombers to rescue South Vietnam from collapse—as Richard Nixon did with the mining of Haiphong harbor in 1972. But neither he nor anyone in the Administrations that preceded and followed his ever answered, or faced, the questions: What then? What follows rescue? By what means can South Vietnam free itself of the need for shoring up and periodic rescue?

Or put it another way. The massive flight of refugees to the South surely suggests—as did previous refugee migrations—what some doves never wish to concede, that millions of Vietnamese do not want to live under a Communist regime and would risk upheaval, homelessness, starvation, the break-up of families, to avoid that fate. That being the case, why could not this widespread non-Communist sentiment be mobilized into an effective, self-sustaining non-Communist nation?

Why could not such a nation be built, despite the massive American expenditure of \$150 billion, 55,000 lives and the untold efforts of thousands of American advisers, teachers and administrators?

One of Mr. Rostow's colleagues on the Texas faculty, Samuel Popkin, an authority on Vietnam but by no means a dove, thinks the problem was largely intervention itself. In simplified form, his complex argument is that an enormous investment of money and power, such as the United States made in Vietnam, was bound to attract the sharpest and most opportunistic Vietnamese into competition for local control of such military, economic and political riches. These men quickly saw that the key to American approval was unrelenting anti-Communism—the wellspring, after all, of American intervention.

But however guileful such men may have been in reaching power, they were not necessarily the most effective, selfless or far-sighted national leaders. As the United States gave them heavy support, the effect was to deliver political and military power to corrupt and self-serving leadership, however anti-Communist. That leadership not only permitted corruption and inept leadership in the army; it was unable either to win the confidence of the non-Communist population or to lead that population in effective economic or social action.

Under the guise of non-intervention in local politics, unswerving, almost unlimited American support for such leaders not only abdicated, or made impossible, basic necessities like an insistence upon cleaning up the South Vietnamese Army. American support also discouraged, to the point of barring, active and effective non-Communist political opposition within South Vietnam. The effect was to give a free hand as well as massive support to corrupt leadership incapable of building a genuinely loyal following among a populace that deserved decent government.

Could American intervention have been managed in some other way, to bring out the best rather than the worst in Vietnam? In Sam Popkin's view, that was not really possible, because it would have opened the political process and risked bringing to power "a Vietnamese Allende," a liberal or radical leader who might have encouraged social reform and even have been willing to negotiate with Communists rather than see South Vietnam destroyed.

Who was the last American President with the courage to take that kind of risk?