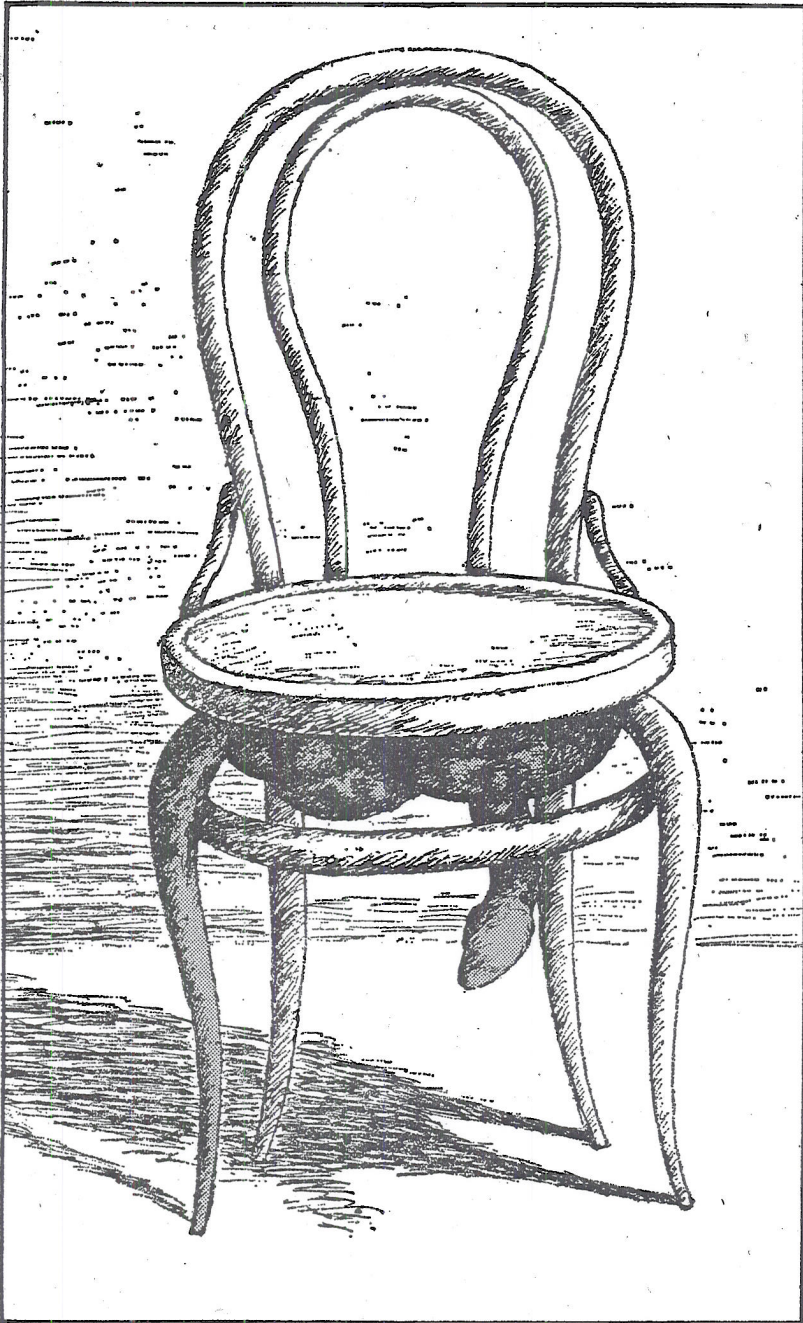


Vietnam: No Peace



Phillippe Welsbecker

By W. C. Westmoreland

CHARLESTON, S. C.—For years, Vietnam was front-page news, a major political issue, and an emotional experience for the nation. Now this has changed: Casualties have been stopped, prisoners released and the controversy eclipsed by matters closer to home.

A full year after the cease-fire, which many thought would bring peace to Vietnam, the country is still ravaged by war, with the prospect of continued bloodshed ahead. The cease-fire did bring about an end to United States military action, cause our 588 prisoners to be released, and set the stage for a truce in Laos. But little else has been accomplished.

During the last year, there have been more than 10,000 hostile contacts and over 13,000 armed attacks resulting in the deaths of more than 33,000 Communists and 6,000 South Vietnamese military men. Also, there have been thousands of civilians killed, injured or abducted in the South.

APR 18 1974 THE NEW YORK TIMES, THURSDAY, APRIL 18, 1974

Within Striking Distance

Students of the situation are not surprised at the developments. I myself, in late 1972, wrote an article for this newspaper while the cease-fire discussions were going on but did not submit it because I thought it might muddle negotiations. I wrote:

"In my opinion, an early peace in Indochina is an illusion. And I also believe that a viable cease-fire is not a realistic prospect, particularly one supervised by a relatively small number of military representatives of four

nations operating on the basis of unanimity."

Americans who drafted the cease-fire agreement were certainly aware that prospects for early peace were remote, but it was reasonable and timely to negotiate this country out of Vietnam and let the Vietnamese fight it out among themselves. What concerned me was that by an agreement we would unduly restrict the ability of the South Vietnamese to protect their national interest.

Indeed, the cease-fire agreement was not entirely satisfactory to the leadership in Saigon. To their disadvantage, the North Vietnamese now occupy portions of South Vietnam, specifically in Quang Tri Province, the mountainous areas to the west along the Laotian and Cambodian borders, and portions of the Mekong Delta.

In general, the Communists dominate territory that will only support peasants with a primitive standard of living.

In this area, there are a greater number of North Vietnamese troops—over 150,000—than at the time of the cease-fire. They are deployed to defend the occupied territory but are also in a position to attack. Such liabilities for the South Vietnamese were the price that our cease-fire negotiators believed had to be paid.

Hanoi's objective is to dominate not only South Vietnam but all of Indochina. From its point of view, it is on a winning strategic track. The North Vietnamese have agreed to a truce in Laos, the Communists domi-

nate a major portion of that country and are a threat to the rest by political or military means.

There is reason for suspicion of the motives of the North Vietnamese in Laos since they have 30,000 troops there, a number hardly necessary to protect the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Communists have made great strides in Cambodia, and their timetable, and patience, may enable them to wear down the Cambodians militarily and politically, so that one day the country will fall under their control, with Prince Norodom Sihanouk reinstated as a figurehead.

Of all of Indochina, South Vietnam is most important to the North Vietnamese, and their ultimate strategy is to break the South Vietnamese regime by disaffecting it politically, bringing about popular weariness, and at an appropriate time establishing a military advantage.

Whereas during the war years Hanoi used propaganda, a great deal of which was generated in the United States from detractors of President Johnson's and President Nixon's Vietnam policies, Hanoi does not now enjoy that same advantage.

During the war years, the situation was like that of two poker players, one with his hand open to public view, the other with his hand clutched to his chest. The Communists and the world knew what we were doing and our internal controversy was laid bare; Hanoi, on the contrary, operated in secrecy. This gave Hanoi a political advantage in the international arena and a psychological one with its people. It has now become fully apparent that Hanoi has large forces on South Vietnamese soil, and its brazen efforts to portray these armies as local dissidents have a hollow ring.

The South Vietnamese, under President Nguyen Van Thieu, never have been deceived about the political character of the war and have made every effort to prepare the people in the South for the political struggle.

Backed by a large army and a capable navy and air force led by experienced officers, the South Vietnamese should be able to take care of themselves. They also have the military and practical advantage of internal lines of communication to support their deployed troops, lines that are short compared with those of Hanoi.

During our involvement in South Vietnam, our policy-makers underestimated the toughness of the North Vietnamese, but not so the leadership in Saigon. Drawing on long experience, Mr. Thieu and others reminded me constantly over the years that their enemies were a tough and tenacious people.

Mr. Thieu is the strongest and best-qualified man to lead his country during the current difficult period when military forces must be maintained on the alert and a strong political base established, maintained and expanded.

He has recently reshuffled his Cabinet and brought into it two bright and capable men, Dr. Phan Quang Dan and Gen. Tran Van Don, as Deputy Premiers.

This indicates that Mr. Thieu is attempting to broaden the base of his Government and to bring into it the best talent available regardless of frictions in the past. It is interesting that while in 1964 knowledgeable people would have taken no bets that the South Vietnamese Government would be successful at the polls, now it is very clear that the non-Communists have an overwhelming majority, and even the most critical observers would give the Communists no more than 25 per cent of a vote.

The North Vietnamese could indeed attack at any time to continue their efforts to accomplish their ends by military means, but they have to weigh the risks involved. They are tenacious and may conclude that the United States is so preoccupied with its internal politics and energy problems that it would stand idly by if they undertook another major offensive.

Hanoi, it is hoped, will realize that the conduct of the American people, as proved in history, is not that predictable. Odds are against a North Vietnamese military success.

There is a strong parallel between the situations in South Vietnam and in Korea. But the Vietnam situation has been far more complex because of a well-established guerrilla movement and political subversives in the South, in addition to invading armies from the North. Further, it is much simpler to defend a peninsula than to defend a country whose borders extend along its entire length, enabling an enemy to take sanctuary in nearby countries.

The Korean war was not brought to a conclusion until President Eisenhower threatened to use atomic weapons, and the Vietnam war was not concluded until Haiphong Harbor was mined and the United States used air power against North Vietnam where it hurt.

Both the Communists in Korea and Vietnam finally agreed to an armistice and a cease-fire respectively only after they had concluded that they could not win militarily, and after face has been saved by a local battlefield success.

Now, twenty years later, South Korea is independent, has a growing economy and is beginning to open communications with North Korea.

I believe Vietnam will follow a similar pattern. In due time, North Vietnam will probably accept the prevailing situation—two independent countries—and conclude that it is to its interest to stop fighting and to coexist in peace. This could take years. But I would not rule out a peacefully unified Vietnam in the far distant future.

Beset with major economic problems and faced with continuing military costs, North and South Vietnam are in a difficult situation. North Vietnam is jeopardizing her vitality by persisting with her aggressive designs; South Vietnam is beginning to come of age. When North Vietnam will accommodate to reality is unknown, but it will come in time.

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