THE VIETNAMESE PROBLEM

BY AMBASSADOR TRAN VAN CHUONG

Since the loss of the Chinese mainland, the citizens of the United States have been repeatedly and rightly told that Viet Nam is the keystone of Indo-China and of South-East Asia, and that the Free World cannot afford to lose Indo-China after already losing China.

This is true. But since the abandonment of half of Viet Nam to the Communists last July at the Geneva Conference, a dangerous pessimism developed in the United States. This pessimism has lessened a great deal since the New Year because of much more favorable reports, but there still is some doubt and anxiety about the usefulness of American help and the ultimate future of Viet Nam. There still is doubt and anxiety because people in the United States do not clearly understand why the Free World lost the Indochinese war in spite of much greater material strength and nearly three billion dollars of American aid in four years, nor how Viet Nam could now be saved with much lesser American help.

This lack of understanding leads many people to overestimate the prestige and strength of the Communists, to credit them with some invincible and mysterious power. This lack of understanding causes them to look for some other defense line in case the remaining half of Viet Nam should be abandoned.
This defeatism is not worthy of the American nation--of a
great nation which has never been defeated in any war and must
assume world leadership against Communist expansion.

And there is no reason to be defeatist!!

The American people must understand more fully that there
is no other defense line in South East Asia. They must also
understand more fully that the Free World did not lose the
Indochinese war because the Viet Minh were morally or
materially strong and irresistible, but only because a wrong
French colonial policy threw into their ranks too many Viet-
namese and prevented other Vietnamese from fighting them
wholeheartedly.

But this colonial policy no longer exists and this explains
the rapid and happy change in the situation since the New Year.
It is not too late because we now can, if we will, have every-
thing needed to beat the Viet Minh on every field, political or
military. But first we must stop day-dreaming of another
defense line.'

THERE IS NO OTHER DEFENSE LINE IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

Viet Nam is not only the most important of the three Indo-
chinese States, it is by far the most heavily populated and the
toughest of them.

It has 23 million inhabitants while Laos has only one million
Still more important, the 23 million Vietnamese are one of the toughest races in Asia. They are the descendents of those who, in 939 A.D. regained their independence from China and, in the thirteenth century, fought and drove out of North Vietnam the famous Mongol hordes that had invaded and conquered a great part of China and Asia. This toughness is still shown by the Vietnamese who, under Communist leadership have just won the Indo-Chinese War. Therefore it is not realistic to think or to dream that if Vietnam is lost, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Burma may be saved by another defense line or by some pact of non-interference or of non-aggression, by some other fool’s bargain with the Communists. And yet all these countries must be saved, for Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand and Burma are the rice bowl of South and South-East Asia.

Indeed Vietnam is strategically at least as important as Formosa for, after already losing the Chinese mainland, the Free World cannot afford to lose Indo-China which is the gateway to India.

These are the reasons why most prominent American statesmen and leaders including President Truman and President Eisenhower, Secretary of State Dean Acheson and Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, have declared that Vietnam is the keystone of South-East Asia and that it must be saved from the Communists if the rest of Asia is to be saved.

That is why American tax-payers have had to pay about three billion dollars in four years to help France fight the Communist-led Viet Minh.
Yet the Indo-Chinese War ended in that most humiliating and disastrous Armistice agreement of Geneva, in the abandonment of half of Viet Nam to the Communists.

WHY DID THE FREE WORLD LOSE THE INDO-CHINESE WAR?

A) It was not because of any Vietnamese inclination to Communism.

On the contrary, of all the countries in the world, Viet Nam is the one which in terms of ethics and Confucian traditions was and still is the farthest removed from Communism, the one which finds Communist doctrines the most repugnant. It is also a country which has never needed Communist theories to solve its social problems for it has no heavy industry and knows nothing of class warfare.

From an agrarian point of view, South Viet Nam is a favored country where even the very poor are never cold or hungry. As for the North, it is perhaps the region where land is more chopped up into tiny holdings than anywhere else in the world, where each village has communal rice fields which are shared equally among all the inhabitants old enough to pay taxes so that everyone always has his bit of earth to cultivate.

From North to South, Communist theories answer no moral or social need. Yet the Communists are now masters of half of Viet Nam and threaten to become masters of the whole. Why?

B) It was not because of any superior material strength.

On the contrary, the French Expeditionary Corps was and is one of the best armies in the world: its Foreign Legion, Parachutists
2nd Armored Car Division, Senegalese, Morroccans, Algerians not only are good, they are famous. It was commanded by the most celebrated French generals, including Marechal Leclerc and Mareahal de Lattre de Tassignay and it was powerfully armed by American aid. Whereas the Viet Minh, with only improvised soldiers commanded by improvised officers and generals, received not one tank, one plane, or one soldier from the Russians and the Chinese. They had to fight most of the war, most of the time, with almost no artillery!

C) It was not because of any irresistible appeal of Ho Chi Minh as a national leader.

Even the nationalists among the Viet Minh do not mistake Ho Chi Minh for a nationalist because, under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh, the Viet Minh killed a great number of nationalists in 1945 and 1946 when they took over the government. They joined him, however, when the war broke out between the French and the Viet Minh on December 19, 1946, because they wanted most to fight the French and had no other means to do so. Unarmed as they were, they could not go underground and fight both the French expeditionary corps and the Viet Minh troops.

They had to choose, and they chose to go along with the latter with no illusions about their communist leaders. In like manner during the Second World War, the Americans, the British, the Chinese and the French themselves were allied with the Communists in order to fight first what seemed to be the most pressing danger.

Ask Colonel Nasser, the Egyptian Premier, or Nehru, the Indian Premier, what would be the best means to throw their countries into the arms of the Communists, they will answer, they have already answered: "It would be to send a strong foreign occupying army into Egypt or India."

D) The Free World lost the Indo-Chinese war only because the Vietnamese were more afraid of colonialism than of communism.

It did not lose the war because the Viet Minh were strong, but rather because a colonial army frightened most of the Vietnamese people into the arms of the communists. The Free World lost the war merely because it had not fully realized that the Vietnamese, like all the other Asiatic peoples, were more afraid of white colonialism than of red or yellow communism; it had not realized that in Asia now, nothing can help and expand communism better than colonialism.

It is the lesson to be drawn from the loss of North Vietnam. If we do not keep it in mind, we shall lose bit by bit not only the remaining half of Viet Nam, but all Asia.
THE LESSON TO BE DRAWN FOR THE REST OF ASIA

We must understand that most of the Asiatic peoples are inclined to be neutral because they are afraid of colonialism and because they are poor. Nevertheless they must be saved from Communism if the Free World is to be saved and they cannot be saved from Communism if they are not first liberated from Colonialism and from poverty.

They have two reasons to be inclined to be neutral:
1) They are so recently freed from white domination, when they are, that they are still more afraid and suspicious of this than of Communism.
2) They are very poor and the poor are less afraid of Communism than the rich.

The poor ought to be just as afraid of Communism as the rich because Communism is an evil which threatens the spirit and the soul even more than material properties. But in fact, the poor are not so afraid of Communism as the rich.

For these two reasons: greater fear and hate of colonialism and lesser fear of Communism because of poverty, most of the Asiatic nations cannot be saved from the lures, traps and attacks of the Communists unless they are helped first to be free and self supporting nations. For these two reasons, they are inclined to be neutral or even to favor Communism when they are obliged to choose in a shooting war and when the other party can be suspected of Colonialism.

This is precisely what happened during the Indochinese war when most of the Vietnamese, even the non-communist ones, helped their Communist countrymen to fight a colonial army and when most of the Asiatic nations of South-East Asia openly favored the Viet-Minh and put the blame on France.

The Prime Ministers of Burma, Ceylon, India, Indonesia and Pakistan met at Colombo and Kandy at almost the same time as the Geneva Conference and on May 2nd, 1954, issued a statement expressing their hope of a speedy termination of the Indochinese war and proposing "that France should declare at the Geneva conference that she is irrevocably committed to the independence of Indochina."

And most of the Asiatic nations applauded the Geneva Armistice which is a grave defeat for the West and abandoned to the communists half of Viet Nam: inspired by dislike of Colonialism, they applauded a Communist victory which may lead to their own enslavement. 
Yet, in spite of their inclination to be neutral, in spite of their inclination to mistake Communism for Nationalism and to favor Communism because of hate of Colonialism, the Asiatic peoples must be saved from Communism if the Free World is to be saved. For, with the progress of science, the Free World now is too small to be effectively protected from war and destruction by a belt of radar and of Nike missiles. It cannot be protected by isolationism or selfishness, but only by human solidarity and Christian charity, by saving from Communism all the remaining non-Communist nations, even the neutral and the neutralist ones.

And we have seen that the only way to save the Asiatic peoples from Communism is to help them first to be free and self supporting nations, and not to interfere with their affairs against their will.

That is why the United States is dedicated to save Asia from Communism and to take the lead in the crusade against communism: it is not a colonial power, it is not suspected of ever wanting to become one, and is powerful and rich enough to help mightily without having to ask for immediate profit. All it has to remember is that it must not allow the solidarity of the White Man and of the Big Powers to prevail over human charity, justice, and equity.

And the best way for the United States to save Asia from the Communists is not only to stand very firm against them, to give teeth to the Manila Pact, but also to develop its technical and economic assistance program.

It is much less expensive, more effective and more profitable to help to build in peace time than to help in a war.

These are the lessons and conclusions to be drawn from the errors and defeats of the past.

THE GENEVA CONFERENCE AND ARMISTICE

These errors and defeats led to the fall of Dien Bien Phu, on May 7, 1954. The fall of Dien Bien Phu was not so great a military defeat as to bring about a military collapse in the defense of North Viet Nam. But it brought a great number of French politicians to want peace at any price and a still greater number to prefer to stop the war by partitioning Viet Nam between France and the Viet Minh rather than go on fighting for a Viet Nam that would be free from them both...

Therefore the fate of Viet Nam was sealed and an international conference was convened in Geneva to look for a peaceful solution of the conflict.

Nine countries were invited to take part in that conference: the three Indochinese States: Viet Nam (called the State of Viet Nam), Cambodia, and Laos, France, the Viet Minh or the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam, the United Kingdom, the U.S.S.R., Communist China, and the United States of America.
But the State of Viet Nam, or the non-Communist Viet Nam, was treated as a patient who was to undergo a surgical operation: everyone, except the Communist, kindly said to her: "of course, we are not going to harm you, above all we are not going to cut you to pieces." And then the kind doctors, that is to say the Big Powers, laid her on the surgical table, refused to listen to any of her protests or proposals, firmly put an anaesthetic mask on her face, and allowed her to be cut into two pieces, to be partitioned between the two surgeons, the French and the Viet-Minh.

The operation was performed by an armistice agreement which was signed by these two surgeons only: the French High Command of the French Union forces in Indochina and the Viet Minh High Command. The doctors gave their blessing in a final declaration to which the American delegation did not join. The American delegation merely promised (in a separate statement) that the United States will refrain from the threat or the use of force to oppose it and "would view any renewal of the aggression in violation of the aforesaid agreement with grave concern and as seriously threatening international peace and security."

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As a matter of fact, article 14 of this Armistice Agreement provided that pending the general elections, to be held within two years, before July 21, 1956, the conduct of civil administration in each zone shall be in the hands of the party whose forces are to be regrouped there, that is to say the Viet Minh north of the 17th parallel, and the French south of it.

And articles 16 and 20 stripped Viet Nam of her right to contract any military alliance or to organize her defense by any other means than through the French Expeditionary Corps.

In its final declaration, however, the Conference took note of the declaration of the French government that it is ready to withdraw its troops from Indochina if requested by the governments concerned.

Thus the Northern half of Viet Nam was given away to the Communists with a little more than half the territory and the population, and the rest, south of the 17th parallel, given the choice between French protection and comparative disarmament and isolation.

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The Delegation of the State of Viet Nam strongly, formally and solemnly protested against this Armistice agreement and proposed instead an armistice without provisional partition of Viet Nam, through disarmament of the belligerent forces, and through the establishment of provisional United Nations control over the entire territory.

But this proposal was rejected without discussion, precisely because no one in the Geneva Conference wanted the responsibility of rejecting the
only proposal that answered the wishes of the Vietnamese people for an armistice without partition; and also because everyone was eager to allow the French Premier, M. Mendès-France, to fulfill his pledge to the French National Assembly of a truce before July 20, 1954... The Conference showed the kindest consideration for everyone, except for the 23 million Vietnamese concerned."

Concluded in such a way, in such a hurry, this Armistice agreement was the worst possible error. It is, for instance, shocking and revolting to give the Vietnamese only until the movement of troops is completed, that is to say until April 19, 1955, the right to choose in which zone of their own country they wish to live. This is a flagrant and unacceptable violation of article 13 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights: "Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country"; and the Viet Minh and the French High Command had no right to dispose in this way of the freedom of 23 million Vietnamese. The French High Command had no right to agree on behalf of the Vietnamese to general elections after having given away to the Communists more than half of the voters. Nor had it the right to strip Viet Nam of her right to organize her own defense as she judges best and to choose her military alliances.

Headed by Dr. Tran van Do, our Minister of Foreign Affairs, the Vietnamese delegation protested against such an armistice and demanded that it be recorded officially that the government of the State of Viet Nam "protested against the way in which the Armistice was concluded and against the conditions of that Armistice which fail to take into account the profound aspirations of the Vietnamese people; and that it reserves for itself entire freedom of action to safeguard the sacred right of the Vietnamese people to territorial unity, to national independence, to liberty."

* This Armistice agreement however, has two good effects: by ending the bloodshed and the fighting, it allows the Vietnamese (who had been almost crushed by twelve years of two wars) to live and breathe and also to destroy the vicious circle which had been the main cause of the Viet Minh victory. For the French themselves recognized and proclaimed the impossibility of saving Viet Nam from Communism without granting it complete independence, but they claimed at the same time that, practically speaking, it was impossible because of the state of war which imposed on the population a number of restrictions, among them the presence of a strong foreign army. Thus the French and the Vietnamese found themselves caught up in a vicious circle which made victory impossible since the state of war prevented them from realizing a condition essential to victory. The first advantage of the Geneva Conference Armistice is to allow them at last to break out of that vicious circle. The second was to put pressure on France and oblige her to agree to the principle of full independence of the three Indochinese States.
WHAT IS THE PROSPECT NOW FOR THE FUTURE OF VIET NAM?

The nationalist government of Premier Ngo Dinh Diem profited by these two advantages of the Geneva Armistice. Instead of choosing the easy course, the easy and ineffectual solution of protection by a foreign occupying army, it asked for the gradual withdrawal of the French forces and for complete independence. As a consequence of this courageous policy, it gained full support of the population and enabled the Free World to apply at last to the remaining half of Viet Nam the magic formula that saved Greece: true national independence and direct American aid.

As a consequence of this nationalist policy, Viet Nam received from France and the United States in the last days of December and the first days of January, the most precious Christmas and New Year presents which they could have given: from the United States on December 21st, the first check of direct American aid, and from France, on December 30th, the abrogation of the Pau agreements of November 1950 which had established a tight French control on the economy and finances of the Indochinese States.

From France, we got back the administration of our port of Saigon on December 31st, our Bank of Issue and the Office of Foreign Exchange on January 5, 1955, and the military command of the territories of South Viet Nam on February 10, 1955.

Thus France gave us back for this New Year our economic, financial and military independence without which there could be no political independence, without which so many non-communist Vietnamese preferred to be neutral or even to side with the Communists to win the war for them!

Thus France set a sound and firm basis for Franco-Vietnamese friendship and association and, by making her aid direct, the United States rendered it fruitful.

This explains the happy change in Viet Nam since the New Year.

At the beginning of December 1954, Free Viet Nam was said to be doomed and its government to be shaky.

And simply because of his courageous and honest policy, the so-called "shy" and "ineffective" Premier revealed himself to be a most clever, successful and popular leader. He received in his tours throughout the country, particularly in areas newly liberated from the Communists, the most unmistakable enthusiastic welcome from the population—a welcome never given to Ho Chi Minh.
And this so-called "shaky" government achieved in a matter of weeks a series of political successes that seemed almost impossible two months before and became the rallying center of the anti-communist forces in Viet Nam.

The most significant rallyings are that of general Lê van Vien, the Binh Xuyen leader, who bowed to the closing of his well-known gambling house in Cholon and put his troops at the disposal of the government, and that of general Trinh Minh The and Colonel Nguyen van Hue, the Cao Dai and Hao dissident leaders, who had been armed by the French to fight the Viet Minh and had gone underground to fight them both.

These rallyings are evidence that we have now for us in Free Viet Nam the moral and nationalist forces which had directly or indirectly, by action or by inaction, helped the Viet Minh to Victory.

Furthermore, we have the protection of the Manila Pact.

These are the very, very important assets of Free Viet Nam: an honest and nationalist government which has the confidence and the support of the people, a true and complete national independence, a rich country with plenty of food and land, a rich country to which the Viet Minh had not been able to apply fully their policy of the scorched earth, and direct American aid, an aid which can be and is highly effective because its motive is not suspect.

From now on, Free Viet Nam can solve all its political problems because it has a true national independent government; and it can solve all its economic problems because of its great natural resources and because of American aid.

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On the other side, the Communist leaders of the Viet Minh will never be pardoned by the Vietnamese for having partitioned the country, for having rejected at Geneva our proposal of an armistice without partition and under the control of the United Nations. They will never be pardoned for having made a communist revolution and purged and killed so many nationalists in 1945 and 1946 when all the Vietnamese wanted was national unity and independence. They will never be pardoned for having, in January 1947, in a few weeks, wantonly destroyed everything in North Viet Nam outside of three or four towns then occupied by the French; they will never be pardoned for having destroyed everything under the pretext of leaving only heaps of ruins to the enemy, an enemy who, for months and even for years, was not even in sight in those areas!

And they are now facing insoluble problems.

As long as the war lasted, they only had to fight and destroy, and
they destroyed everything in their policy of the scorched earth: roads, railroads, bridges, telegraph poles, houses, all the houses which had more than one story. Now they have to keep their promise to rebuild in much greater beauty. They have to rebuild a country which they have themselves destroyed and which has always been much poorer than the South and dependent on the South for its food and for its rice supply. To rebuild, they are not only asking for French cooperation, they must accept Chinese help, a meager help which the Chinese Communists cannot afford to give for nothing...

The Vietnamese in the North are now realizing with horror that the Viet Minh have imposed and are imposing on them incredible hardships and sacrifices only to replace French colonialism by a much harsher one: Communist Chinese Colonialism, which is the worst of all.

This, and all the odious and unbearable tyrannies of the communist regime, explain the continuos flow of hundreds of thousands of refugees abandoning everything and even risking their lives on frail rafts and small boats on the rough sea, or fighting bare-handed against regular Viet Minh troops, in a desperate flight to freedom. They are now more than five hundred thousand and we have to care for them.

When hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese are showing such determination how can we hesitate to help them save their freedom which is our own freedom? How can we despair for the fate of mankind when they are giving such lessons of human courage?

And how can it be said that the Viet Minh are popular and gaining ground in Viet Nam when such heroism is shown by those who flee them, when such an enthusiastic welcome is given to President Ngo Dinh Diem by the population who have just been liberated from them in South and Central Viet Nam?

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Indeed the tide is turning strongly in Viet Nam for the Free World and against the Communists.

What is strong in Viet Nam is Nationalism, not Communism.

The Communists won the war because, for eight years, a wrong colonial policy threw into their ranks too many Nationalist and prevent­ed other true Nationalists from fighting them.

But this wrong policy no longer exists. France is now our friend and our ally as Great Britain is now a friend and ally of India and of America; France is no longer our master or our adversary, and the colonialists can no longer harm both France and Viet Nam by tying the hands of the Nationalist Vietnamese who are the only ones capable of defeating the Communist-led Viet Minh.
The Nationalists can now organize themselves and build up their country and their forces against the Communists.

And what they have been able to do, in only a few weeks of comparative freedom to clear up the wreckage and untidiness of eight years of war and false independence is full evidence that they can beat the Communists in every field, political or military, if given enough help.

They only have to remember that the real strength of the country is not in partisanship which leads to division and weakness, but in the mass of the people; and that the people of Viet Nam are hungry for protection, protection against robbers and thieves and against possible tyrants of the police and of the State itself; hungry for security, justice, and honest administration, not for high taxes, false propaganda and official lies; hungry for tolerance and real personal freedom, not for mutual spying, public confessions, and compulsory dancing and singing with empty stomachs and tears in their eyes.

The Vietnamese are an old tough race and a civilized one. Once again, as many times in the past, they can and they will save their country from barbarians...

Given to such men and to such a country, aid is not a grant. It is a necessary and fruitful investment in a potentially rich country: necessary to the defense of the Free World and fruitful for the future expansion of American trade and free enterprise.

Until now a reserved market for a few hundred privileged men, Viet Nam is today wide open to friendly and profitable relations with all non-communist countries, and this is also very important for the economic equilibrium of Asia.

Washington, March, 1955