

DEBRIEFING

Central Vietnam - Ted Heathner
1958-1960

Once again time for Debriefing, the ^{Consul} informal, unofficial, and unrehearsed story of American Career Diplomats and their families abroad. I'm Jack Walters and my guest tonight is Mr. Ted Heathner, former ~~Counsel~~ ^{Consul} in South Vietnam. These broadcasts are made with the cooperation of the Department of State in Washington and are not intended to reflect official government policy at any level. Their purpose is to tell Americans at home some of the problems and experiences of their representatives stationed in foreign countries. Well, here is Mr. Heathner.

Heathner: We went to Vietnam in 1958 and at that time, of course, the thing that has been most in the news was just barely beginning, that is, the Communists had only then begun to give us the first indications that they meant to mount an all-out attack on South Vietnam. Vietnam, as you know, is a divided country, like Germany, and Korea - and the North is Communist but the South is still very much in the free world. Vietnam has got a population of thirty million all told - 14 of them in the South and 16 million in the North. It was divided in 1954 as a result of the Geneva agreements at that time and South Vietnam has done very well in terms of building up a free economy since then. The gross national product per capita in South Vietnam is about \$110 a year, which is pretty good - and much better, incidentally, than it is in the North where it is, as near as we can make out, only about \$70. Actually, per capita food consumption has decreased in the North below what it was before the war. Vietnam is pretty much an agricultural country. The chief exports are rice and rubber and with the exception possibly of Saigon there really aren't any manufacturing areas in the country. There is a coal mine in central Vietnam which was in my consulate district and which is now being developed with American aid to the point where it might be the nucleus for an industrial complex at some point in the future.

Walters: What was your position there, Ted?

Heathner: In Hue? Well, I first served in Hue from '58 to '60 as the American Consul there.

Walters: Where is that?

Heathner: That's about 80 miles south of the 17th parallel which divides the country between the Communist North and the free South, and then after home leave we went back to Vietnam for a short period and I was in the Embassy in Saigon in the political section.

Walters: How large is your family?

Heathner: I have just one daughter. She was born shortly before we went to Vietnam and learned to speak Vietnamese, if anything, I think better than English when she was living in Hue, but she's forgotten it all now.

Walters: Oh, really?

Heathner: Yes. We try to get her to speak it a little bit, but it's difficult. My wife and I, of course, were trained in Vietnamese before we went over there. I think my wife is perhaps the only American woman - official American woman - who speaks Vietnamese, although there are a few missionaries whose wives do very well. Jean and I went through the same course at the Foreign Services Institute.

Walters: How long did it last?

Heathner: Nine months.

Walters: How many hours?

Heathner: It was full time. We went all day. Well, it was five hours a day with a Vietnamese tutor, and then as much work with tape recorders as we could stand after that. Some days it was eight hours, some days ten, and some days you just couldn't take any more.

Walters: I should imagine that after nine months of that you could speak it pretty well.

Heathner: It's a very difficult language. It's, of course, closely related to Chinese. We were able to get along, but I would not say we were fluent when we got to Vietnam. In fact, I think most of my proficiency came after I was there and working with it.

Walters: Does the country have any literature?

Heathner: Yeah, a very considerable body of Vietnamese literature. The traditional literature is mostly in the Chinese style. As you know, of course, the French were there for about 80 years, and there is a strong infusion, I think a strong influence, from French culture which has had an effect on Vietnamese literature as well as the Chinese. So now you get sometimes an amalgam, sometimes obviously European influence. They write novels which are very much like our novels. You can also find poetry in the old style.

Walters: Were you in North Vietnam at all?

Heathner: No, you know, we have no diplomatic relations with North Vietnam at all. We recognized South Vietnam in 1949 at the time that the French reached their agreements with Emperor Bao Dai and set up the free Vietnam, which at that time controlled all of the country, at least nominally, and then at the time of the Geneva agreements which divided Vietnam, of course the United States continued to recognize the successor government of the Bao Dai regime which was the government of Ngo Dinh Diem, the present President of Vietnam. The last Americans in Hanoi were there in '54.

Walters: What is the military and political situation in South Vietnam, free Vietnam now?

Heathner: Well, it's a bad situation, as anyone who has been reading the newspapers these days knows. About '58, obviously by '59, the North Vietnamese had decided to try to take over South Vietnam by force, and at that time the agents which they had left behind in South Vietnam at the time of the armistice -- you may recall there was a withdrawal of all Communist forces into the Northern part of the country -- they left behind quite a network of agents and subversive machinery, in place, and this was activated, beginning about 1958, as best we can make out, and infiltrations from the North began to be stepped up in '59, in '60, and very dramatically last year. They turned more and more to the use of terror, assassinating government officials, particularly at the village and the district level, trying to paralyze the government by these tactics, striking not really just at government officials but at anybody who sympathizes with the government ~~officials~~ and cooperates with the government, and these tactics with their machinery have grown and they now have doubled and redoubled their hard-core regulars in South Vietnam in the course of the past two years. As they have increased their

regular --they call them regular -- forces and the use of terror, they have been increasingly successful in cutting off parts of rural Vietnam from the control of the government. There are areas which are under government control only during the daylight hours. Actually, my consular district, that is the Hue district, was quite peaceful when I was there, and I could travel freely without an escort, even into the mountains usually, although sometimes a Chief of Province would send his own bodyguard with me if he thought . . . I think this was more of a ~~bodyguard with him~~ courtesy than anything else at that time. Now, however, up in Kontum and Pleiku, some of the high plateau provinces in the Hue district, it isn't safe to travel without a large escort, and this is mainly the result of infiltration from North Vietnam via Laos, right straight across the parallel, some of it by sea, but mostly through Laos, and we estimate that Communist forces have quintupled in that area since early 1960.

Walters: How many Americans are in that area which is being heavily infiltrated?

Heathner: Well, I don't know exactly now. At the time that I was there, there were two MAG detachments - that's our advisory, military advisory group, and that there was also under contract a civilian company, John, Drake, and Piper, which was building a road as part of our economic aid to Vietnam program. At that time I think there may have been a hundred people in the high plateau. In my whole consular district, including the road people who were there only a short time (they've gone now), there were only about 200 Americans, many of them missionaries.

Walters: When did you return from there?

Heathner: We came back from Vietnam this last time in the summer of '61.

Walters: Now, we are beefing up our forces there now - our training forces, our advisory forces, are we not?

Heathner: That's right. Well, actually, back in May of '61, Vice-President Johnson, as you recall, went to Vietnam, precisely because President Kennedy and the other leaders of our government realized that a very serious situation was shaping up and they wanted the Vice-President to discuss the problem with President Diem and see what kind of measures we could take to help them defend themselves. As a matter of fact, when Vice-President Johnson was there, I acted as his interpreter on a couple of occasions. At that time we decided, with the government of Vietnam, that we would support an increase in their armed forces and an increase in our economic aid program, with the idea that a rising standard of living would give the people more of a stake in this fight. And immediately, well, not immediately, but a few months thereafter, as the effects began to be felt, both in terms of morale and the pickup in the effectiveness of their armed forces, by the end of that summer, in August and September, there were some good reports from Vietnam. There were some large, important victories in the Delta area against the Viet Cong and well, this is hard to document, I think the immediate response from the North was to increase infiltration, step-up their terror campaign, actually casualties now are running on both sides about 3,000 people every month, and you get upwards of 500 incidents of violence a week in Vietnam.

Walters: South Vietnam?

Heathner: That's right.

Walters: Now, the term Viet Congh refers to not only the North Vietnamese but the guerillas who infiltrate South Vietnam.

Heathner: It's just the guerillas fighting in South Vietnam.

Walters: I see.

Heathner: You may remember the French fought an army which was often called the Vietnam. This is an abbreviation for a front organization which was set up by Hu Chi Min at the end of World War II. In China, as a matter of fact, which then took over the struggle against the French, the Viet Congh is just an abbreviation for the Vietnamese Communists. It's a term used with contempt in the South.

But after Vice-President Johnson was there, things picked up a little, and then they raised the ante, in effect, and the situation became much more serious toward the end of last year. So much so, in fact, you may recall, President Kennedy sent General Taylor to Vietnam to confer again with President Diem, and we announced that we would support further increases in assistance to Vietnam; recently, January 4 to be exact, there was a joint communique issued - USGUN - that's a government of Vietnam communique, which stressed our effort to give all Vietnamese a stake in this fight, an economic stake in terms of a rising standard of living. Not for that matter, that there is any question about their fighting. I think the casualty figures speak for themselves. I think these people don't want to be under a Communist regime, and they have been fighting Communists for a long time.

You are listening to Debriefing. A candid story of how American Diplomats and their families live and work abroad. I'm Jack Walters and my guest tonight is Mr. Ted Heathner, former United States Consul in South Vietnam.

Walters: Ted, tell us something about the provincial councils which exist in South Vietnam. This is an effort, in brief, is it not, to localize government influence, or to give more autonomy to individual provinces areas of Vietnam.

Heathner: Yes, I think partly this is the reason. Well, as you know, the administration which President Diem inherited from the French was essentially a central government - it's not a federal system like our own, and this means that the lines of authority go out from the central government in Saigon, directly to the province chiefs and district chiefs under them. Traditionally Vietnamese villages have always had a village council. I am not aware that there has ever been in Vietnamese history a provincial council, but one of the efforts to give the people more of a sense of participation in their own government, and also, I think, to give the central government increasingly a benefit of the information and knowledge and first hand experiences from the grass roots level, these provincial councils were set up at President Diem's behest in the last few months. We really haven't had an opportunity to see how they are going to work out in practice.

Walters: What is life like in an area like Hue?

Heathner: Well, Hue, of course, is the cultural heartland of Old Vietnam. It is the seat of the Binh Dinh dynasty and the old throne room and the old walled city with triple moats and triple walls is still there, and there is a new University in Hue that is the result of the personal interest of President Diem who was born in Hue, which I think gives it quite a bit of standing as a cultural center in modern terms, as well as in the old traditional . . .

Walters: It's still pretty active culturally?

Heathner: Yes, it is. It's always been an educational center, even under the French, when many of the best families would send their children there. There were several famous high schools which operated there. Hue is a beautiful little town between the mountains.

Walters: How long were you there all told in Hue?

Heathner: Little less than two years.

Walters: Well, now contrast your life there with life in Saigon.

Heathner: Well, of course, Saigon is a great metropolitan city. It's a beautiful city in a different way from Hue. Hue is old Vietnam. One of the most delightful experiences that we had there was to rent sampans in the evening and float down the river on the sampan, and you could, if you wanted to -- you could hire a couple of girls to sing the old traditional Vietnamese songs. There is a special kind of music that comes from Hue, which they call Cue-Hue, and this, so the story goes, come from Chau music - which was the old Indianized empire which the Vietnamese overthrew and assimilated when they came down the peninsula. Their music was then taken into the Vietnamese culture and these songs which they sing on the river have these elements still in them. I used to go out bicycling, and that's really the best way to see the countryside. There are large areas of rural Vietnam which you can't get into by road, but there are paths, and if you can bicycle down the path you can see a lot of Vietnam without killing yourself walkin' in that climate.

Walters: How much aid have we extended to South Vietnam?

Heathner: Well, between '55 and fiscal '60, roughly two billion dollars, including military aid. Vietnam, as you probably know, is the second biggest American aid program, Korea being the first. We first had to help them settle about 800,000 refugees from Communist Vietnam, back in 1954-55, and then the whole country having been torn up - - well, in some cases for about nine or ten years warfare, it was necessary to do a lot of rehabilitation, and only then could we get launched on a program of trying to develop their industries and exports.

Walters: Well, now, Ted, a lot of people say that Vietnam may turn into another Korea? What do you say about that?

Heathner: Well, I don't think that we can overlook the possibility that the Communists may decide to start a war in South Vietnam. The United States, as you know, of course, is determined that we won't let this country of 14 million people, which has fought communism so long and so well, be taken by conquest. The United States, as you know, is now extending very considerable amounts of economic and military aid to Vietnam. We haven't yet, I think, arrived at the point where we can begin to see the results which we hope will flow from the increased measures, which General Taylor recommended

and which President Kennedy put into effect. I don't think that there is likely to be another Korea in South Vietnam, but as I said, this is something that we can't overlook. The United States is committed under the SEATO protocol to help the Vietnamese defend themselves. We have a very considerable stake in South Vietnam, in terms of our prestige in that part of the world. I think the measures which we are now taking are going to be adequate for the Vietnamese to win their own war, provided the Communists don't decide to intervene from the North.

Walters: In the fashion of Korea -

Heathner: That's right. And this, of course, is something I can't pretend to predict.

Walters: No. But I suppose we know enough now to be aware of any build-up which would become evident north of the 17th parallel? Or is it a terrain where you can spot such things?

Heathner: Of course, the terrain is very difficult, and they have in existence now in Vietnam a very large army - about 350,000 men.

Walters: That's considerably more than South Vietnam has, isn't it?

Heathner: Yes. Yes, the South Vietnamese army is now less than 200,000. Of course, the real problem at the moment is this guerilla warfare. And the guerillas can enter South Vietnam all along a very, long, rugged frontier and by sea.

Walters: I heard one estimation, Ted, of about 20,000 guerilla active.

Heathner: Yes, the most recent estimate of what we call hard-core guerillas was 22,000. This is . . . by this we mean well-armed, well trained guerillas. Then there are two other categories, they break them down this way themselves - that is the Communists do - their guerilla forces and their local forces, and these supporting forces, are of course, much larger, and they can draw on these local forces when they make attacks. We believe that they are capable of attacking in battalion strength at several places simultaneously now.

Walters: In full armed battalion strength?

Heathner: That's right. And they have done this, as you may recall.

Walters: How do these attacks take place? Describe one.

Heathner: At the moment they are concentrating on erosion tactics - a multitude of small attacks all over the country, and since . . .

Walters: What do they do - burn a village, hit a village?

Heathner: Just about everything. Kidnappings, assassinations, destruction of key points like bridges, digging up roads, digging trenches across roads, is a favorite device, going into homes at night and so-called taxing the population, recruiting by terror, threatening the young men of the village that if they don't sign up with the Viet Cong that their fathers and mothers, or their wives and children will be subject to reprisals, and some of the most incredibly grim and bloodthirsty kinds of reprisals. Not long ago a District Chief in one of the southern provinces was ambushed, and he and his wife were killed immediately in the car, but their two children, ages one and three, were not. They were still alive, and the Communists came out of the brush and beheaded the children. This is an effort to terrorize the local officials into being afraid to go into the villages, being afraid to leave their offices, being afraid to do anything, or even to serve in the villages. This is the tactic as far as the government is

concerned. And the people, too. One of the most successful, in terms of getting widespread support for the government, one of the most successful programs, of course, was the malaria eradication program, which our own people had a large hand in. These teams have been a prize target for the Communists. A number of them have been killed, many of them kidnapped - kidnapped for a short time, and lectured and threatened. Incidentally, the program is still going forward, and these teams go into the villages unarmed, and without escort. A very great display of courage on the part of the Vietnamese who are running this show. And it is not Americans. We are underwriting it in terms of equipment, but the people that are doing this in the villages, the actual spraying, on the firing line, are Vietnamese.

Walters: Are there any established firing lines?

Heathner: No, this is hidden, guerilla warfare in the classic...

Walters: No order of battle, or anything?

Heathner: There are areas which are more or less guerilla strongpoints in certain jungle and swamp areas. It is difficult to penetrate, and these areas are what we call Red areas. Now this doesn't mean that the government of Vietnam can not, and does not, move into them. Their army is still perfectly capable of moving at will throughout the country, but it does mean that those areas, for practical purposes are not under the control of the government most of the time. They are under the Communist regime. Communists set-up little administrations - I do not know precisely what form these take. During the French time they set up regular governments in the Maque and the brush, as you may recall.

Walters: They are sort of warlords, are they not?

Heathner: Well, they are better organized than that. This is a show which is run from Hanoi, and run very well. They are trained. After all, they are perhaps the best guerillas in the world. They had eight years of experience against the French, and they have been perfecting their techniques ever since.

Walters: Now, in turn, Ted, is the South Vietnam government sending any penetration forces into the North?

Heathner: No, not that we are aware of. This has often been mentioned in the public prints, but it raises a host of questions and problems, and I think that this is something that we have no information on. I would say that we were very fortunate in being able to be in a part of Vietnam and at a time when we could move quite freely. The Americans in Vietnam are in considerable danger if they try to get to rural Vietnam and their movements are for that reason pretty restricted, as ours were not.

Walters: The situation has worsened that much then.

Heathner: It has deteriorated very greatly throughout Vietnam, but particularly in the Delta area, the southern area; actually, central Vietnam where the Hue consular district is, is still relatively good. That part of Vietnam is closest to the Communist part of Vietnam, but for a variety of reasons has always been more secure, rather than less so.

Walters: Why?

Heathner: Well, I think the first reason that you have to bring forth, is that that area, unlike the southern part of Vietnam, the Saigon area, for a period of seven, eight, and sometimes nine years, was under a Communist regime. You see the French tended to pull back into the cities and defend just urban centers like Hue. And the result of this was that whole provinces of Vietnam had a Communist government for many years. And then after Geneva in 1954, when the Communists pulled out, these people had had enough. They had experienced a Communist regime, and they did not want any more of it. So they are much more resistant there to Communist infiltration.

Walters: It served as a kind of inoculation.

Heathner: That's right. Another reason is that this is the traditional heartland of Vietnam and it's harder for the Communists to move into this kind of situation, than into the more urbanized, Westernized centers. People don't move around much, and a strange face is recognized, and if an agent comes into the village, well, everybody knows there is somebody new around. And then, too, just geography. .. because in central Vietnam you have nuclear villages with the fields out around them, while in the southern part of Vietnam the houses are all strung out along canals and farmsteads, and it's easy for the Communists to threaten these people individually and to force them to cooperate whereas you have in central Vietnam this little nucleus, and the people help one another. It takes a pretty well armed band to move into a place like that and take over. It takes only a few people to terrorize a man who is by himself, of course.

Walters: Yes, off in a house way out in the country.

Heathner; Yeah, particularly, as is usually the case, he isn't armed.

This has been another in the series Debriefing. - Informal, unofficial, and unrehearsed. Designed to tell our listeners the story of how American diplomats live and work abroad. Tonight's guest, Mr. Ted Heathner, former consul at Hue, South Vietnam. Your reporter - Jack Walters.