Roundtable

VIETNAM

Participants: Ray C. Hillam
Eugene England
John L. Sorenson

The responsibility to make an intelligent and moral response to the threat or fact of war is always a heavy and difficult, but unavoidable, one—perhaps more so now than ever before. In this Roundtable three men who share a common faith but quite different backgrounds and opinions attempt to face that responsibility. Ray Hillam, an associate professor of political science at Brigham Young University, just returned from a year as a Fulbright-Hays Professor in Vietnam; Eugene England, who is teaching Literature and Theology at Stanford University and is Assistant Director of the L.D.S. Institute there, is a managing editor of DIALOGUE*; John Sorenson, a member of* DIALOGUE*'s Board of Editors, was trained in anthropology at UCLA and taught at Brigham Young University before engaging full-time in industrial research (in the course of which he has done extensive work on Vietnam).*

VIETNAM: A NEW ALTERNATIVE

Ray Cole Hillam

I

Since returning from Vietnam in July, I have become aware of an increased polarization of opinion in the United States on a solution to the war in Vietnam. To a large extent, this polarization is a result of what I prefer to call the "crusades" of the "usurpers" vs. the "abdicators"—the "usurpers" being those who see value in the continued Americanization of the war, and the "abdicators" being those who seek immediate withdrawal. Both are aptly called crusaders because they tend to base their arguments upon moral propositions. The "crusading usurpers" argue that it is immoral not to step-up the war against Communist aggression, while the "crusading abdicators" argue that we should extricate ourselves from an immoral war. Neither group hesitates to simplify the complex issues that are involved, nor alter the facts and issues to justify a position.

Assumptions of the Crusaders

The "crusading usurpers" argue that we should step-up our involvement. In

effect, they reject President Kennedy's statement: "It is their war. They are the ones who have to win it or lose it . . . the people of Vietnam." The war cannot be won, according to the "usurpers" unless we take firm control of the situation.

The "crusading abdicators" feel that we should withdraw from the war either because "we can't win," or because we should never have become involved in the first place. They assume that withdrawal will bring an end to the war, as far as we are concerned, and that the Vietnamese will be better off without our presence.

Each group argues that only by following its proposals can we terminate the war, salvage our tarnished prestige, and retain the values of a democratic society.

Critique of the "Crusading Usurpers"

The "crusading usurpers" are undermining the role of the Vietnamese in the South and encouraging the escalation of the air war in the North. Some Vietnamese in the South refer to our presence as the "new colonialism." A Vietnamese officer, with whom I was closely associated, said: 'tMany of us feel that we are without honor—mercenaries of the Americans." "Some of us," confided another, ". . . would prefer to fight the enemy but we have been pushed aside by the better armed Americans." Many of my students at the University of Saigon were convinced that the outcome of the war was up to the Americans. This trend toward Americanization is occurring in both the pacification and the military effort. Due to lack of local leadership, the problems of communication, and the pressure from Washington for immediate results, some frustrated Americans are tending to become supervisors rather than advisors.

Some "usurpers" demand that the war be escalated, particularly in the North. General Wheeler, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, is apparently convinced that with proper escalation in the North, the war could be terminated within a very few months. The fact is, however, thus far bombing has neither reduced the infiltration of supplies and manpower into the South nor produced negotiations. An increased effort against the North, including a blockade of Haiphong Harbor, would not seriously hinder an estimated 300,000 Viet Cong guerrillas in the South who could obtain continued support from China and Russia through Laos and Cambodia. Also, an invasion of North Vietnam, even assuming that China would remain aloof, would only magnify the size and duration of the present war. If necessary, Ho Chi Minh and his government would return to the rugged terrain of North Vietnam, Laos, and South China from where they fought the French years ago.

Critique of the "Crusading Abdicators"

The "crusading abdicators" are also vulnerable in their assumptions about the war. They have proposed few, if any, concrete programs for withdrawal; they simply declare that we should "pack up our bags and go home." Many feel that President Johnson or his successors can or will withdraw, thus grossly underestimating the persistent nature of the President and the real nature of our extensive commitments in South Vietnam and neighboring countries.

The "abdicators" give no evidence that war would end even if we did withdraw. Other states in Southeast Asia are plagued by Hanoi and Peking supported insurgent movements, and a Communist victory in South Vietnam could only

give impetus to other "wars of liberation." Moreover, Ho Chi Minh has clearly stated his intention to promote such wars in Laos and Cambodia as well as South Vietnam. Also, a Communist victory in South Vietnam would give credence to the Peking line of active revolution as opposed to Moscow's policy of "peaceful co-existence."

Hanoi feels that we can be defeated in Washington just as the French were defeated in Paris; the cries of the "abdicators" have hardened their resolve and have thus prolonged the present magnitude of the war. An immediate withdrawal would not necessarily end the war, bring security to Southeast Asia, or terminate our involvement, but rather would result in further wanton destruction in both South Vietnam and in other Southeast Asian countries.

The Present Situation

Prior to the spring of 1964 the Viet Cong were making substantial gains in the South; indeed, they were rapidly evolving from guerrilla to conventional tactics—the final phase of their "protracted war." Our military build-up after the Gulf of Tonkin incident has curbed, and in some areas even reversed, this evolution. There are indications that the Viet Cong are having difficulty replacing men in their battalion-size conventional units, many of which have been decimated by allied troops. North Vietnamese conventional units have likewise been soundly beaten, except near the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) where they are constantly putting pressure on the U.S. Marines. The commitment of more than 500,000 U.S. personnel, with all their modern advantages such as vertical envelopment and superior firepower, has prevented the insurgents from taking the conventional offensive necessary to complete the final phase of their strategy. With this massive involvement, the enemy cannot possibly win a military victory.

On the other hand, the allied forces are also having problems. Despite the military pressure, which has accounted for an estimated 250,000 enemy dead since 1961, it is also estimated that over the past two years, the insurgents have increased their total manpower by 65,000. They now number about 300,000 men who are armed with modern weapons, including flamethrowers, rockets, and heavy mortars. They have been able to carry on their guerrilla war practically unabated because of the genius of their organization—the infrastructure.

The infrastructure is a complex network of vertical, horizontal, and parallel structures designed to enmesh the population and retain commitments—to mobilize and manipulate the masses. When men, supplies, assassinations, ambushes, or mortar attacks are needed, it is the infrastructure which arranges them. The infrastructure finances its activities by taxing the peasants, exacting tolls at roadblocks, and by wresting fees and taxes from all levels of business—from the Saigon prostitute and street vendor to the large plantation owner. Until the power of this infrastructure is undermined, there is little hope for a satisfactory solution in Vietnam.

The present Saigon government is beginning to show some signs of political progress. A year and a half ago, the Thieu-Ky regime was barely able to survive Buddhist riots. However, since that time, the Vietnamese have been able to elect a constituent assembly, draft a constitution, hold reasonably free elections with fairly broad participation, and elect and inaugurate a new government. Conse-

quently, the Saigon regime is increasing its admittedly meager aura of legitimacy. Even though military men are still very much in control, the military has kept its promise to return to elected rule. While there are some indications that its programs are winning more acceptance among the populace, the Saigon government, nevertheless, is precarious at best and would most likely collapse without our support.

It is unlikely that there will be negotiations before the U.S. presidential elections in 1968. Hanoi is obtaining more support from its allies and places great significance on, and derives much hope from, the bitter divisions developing in our country on Vietnam policy. Hanoi's hopes for the victory of a peace candidate in 1968 and Washington's unwillingness to make any meaningful concessions at the present time point to at least another year of continued struggle before meaningful negotiations can be undertaken.

This effort to criticize the "crusaders" who have polarized the issues and done injury to a constructive approach in Vietnam, is based on two assumptions: (1) further escalation of the war will not bring meaningful results; and (2) given our commitments and the magnitude of our involvement, we will not withdraw. Four additional assumptions have been made: (1) the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese forces in the South cannot win militarily; (2) the primary enemy is not North Vietnam, but the Viet Cong infrastructure and insurgent forces in the South; (3) the strength, morale, and legitimacy of the present Saigon government is precarious but improving; and (4) negotiations with Hanoi and the Viet Cong are unlikely until after our Presidential elections in 1968. In view of these assumptions, I wish to outline a possible solution to ending the war, while at the same time, achieving our original objective of defending the South from aggression.

II

The termination of the war can best be achieved through the isolation of the enemy in South Vietnam. While the Viet Cong cannot be entirely eliminated, they can be rendered less effective by denying them their resources. This would require more effective restriction of the infiltration of men and supplies from North Vietnam and reducing the local sources of supplies, manpower, and popular support in the South.

Restrict Infiltration

The current strategy of interdiction is clearly insufficient. In recent months, infiltration has been so great that the enemy actually has been able to escalate its military effort in the South. The apparent futility of the present strategy is reflected in the admission of the South Vietnamese Defense Minister, Lt. General Cao Van Vien, that bombing in North Vietnam cannot stop infiltration. The main problem is the enemy's infiltration routes and base areas in Laos and Cambodia; until this problem is resolved, infiltration will continue. The Defense Minister believes that the war will last another twenty or thirty years unless the infiltration of men and supplies through these two countries can be halted.

Negotiations, a suggested alternative to bombing in North Vietnam, would also be no guarantee against infiltration. Hanoi would continue to prosecute the war in the South even while negotiating. For example, the southern branch of

the Lao Dong party (Communist) has been instructed not to deviate from, or delay, the original goals and strategy, even in the event of negotiations with the Americans. North Vietnamese General Nguyen Van Vinh, who directs the war in the South, has declared that it is possible that the North will conduct negotiations while the South continues to fight, and that the South will participate in negotiations and fight at the same time.

The infiltration of huge quantities of supplies and an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 men per month must be physically reduced. I feel this can best be achieved through a system of fortified barriers located south of the Demilitarized Zone extending from the South China Sea across South Vietnam and Laos to the Mekong River, and at strategic points along the border which South Vietnam shares with Laos and Cambodia. We should redeploy our military effort along these barriers and implement tactical rather than strategic interdiction. Instead of carrying the war to the North, we must concentrate on "closing" the access routes to the South. This will not stop infiltration altogether, but it is more apt to reduce the flow than our present effort. Our role should focus on protecting South Vietnam from infiltration rather than seeking a solution through escalated air power in the North.

This system of fortified barriers should be established before the advent of negotiations. Since negotiations are unlikely until after the American presidential elections, we have approximately one year for implementation. As the barriers are erected we could de-escalate and possibly stop the bombing in the North without any serious adverse consequences. Also, cessation of the bombing would bring increased pressure on Hanoi to negotiate.

Local Resource Control

More significant to the enemy apparatus than infiltration from the North is the availability of support in the South. The locally recruited hamlet and village cadre, who provide the necessary link between the hard-core leadership and the masses, are the backbone of the enemy infrastructure. It is through these cadre, who in many cases have their own political base, that the enemy is able to secure the recruits and supplies necessary to carry on the war.

The apparatus has demonstrated its ability to fatten itself on our economic and military assistance intended for the Saigon government, to recruit an estimated 5,000 to 7,000 men per month in the South, to acquire huge quantities of rice, to purchase medical supplies in the larger cities, to carry out an effective system of taxation, and to indoctrinate and intimidate the population. All of these activities can and must be restricted. For example, a food denial program, backed by an effective pacification program, should be devised and initiated immediately.

In South Vietnam there are a multitude of programs, many of them sound, which have not been integrated into an overall national policy. A recent step toward this integration is the Revolutionary Development (RD), another term for revitalized pacification. RD is an integrated military and civil process to restore, consolidate, and expand government control so that "nation-building" can succeed. It consists of coordinated military and civil actions to free the people from enemy control; to restore public security; initiate political, social, and economic development; extend effective government authority; and win the support of the

people, even many within the enemy's infrastructure. It is designed to be a comprehensive, balanced, and integrated approach to provide security and to transform South Vietnam into a free, viable, and enduring society. In concept, it ties together all sides of the struggle; military, economic, political, and social. As a result, the marginal man (middle cadre) of the infrastructure becomes the most significant target.

I observed the pacification program in Tuyen Duc Province of the Central Highlands over a ten-month period. It was very noticeable to me that there was increased contact between the government and the rural population, that extensive rural construction was being undertaken, and improvements were being made in the economic, social and political well-being of the people. However, in many areas, pacification has not been this successful. For instance, it was recently announced in the *Saigon Post* that the Khan Van Hamlet, just miles from Saigon, has been pacified again for the fifth time. There are conflicting statistics on the number of hamlets brought under government control through the RD pacification effort. All admit the figures are small, demonstrating that while RD is sound in theory, it is not moving along as well as it might. A U.S. provincial representative in a Delta province (who had been in Vietnam for several years) was enthusiastic about the new approach, although he admitted it would take close to ten years before he could effectively pacify his province at the present rate. "At least," he said, "we have the answer to pacification, but do we have the time?"

Sending 59-member teams who have had three months of intensified training on matters of security and rural development into the hamlets for six months or longer should be viewed as only part of the RD effort. The pacification of the rural hamlet must be followed up with the presence of a legitimate and interested government.

While the Thieu-Ky regime has made some significant achievements in the past, its greatest challenge lies ahead. The resettlement of hundreds of thousands of refugees, the rehabilitation of tens of thousands of Hoi Chanh's (Viet Cong who have rallied to the government), reshaping a huge military establishment which is perhaps more a drain on the economy than a contribution to the war effort together with the administration of the pacification program are some of these challenges. The problems of corruption within the government and armed forces and of rampant inflation also have yet to be resolved.

Since the newly elected government remains essentially a military regime, Thieu and Ky could build public confidence by transferring some political power to qualified civilians, particularly in those provinces where there is little Viet Cong pressure. For instance, the military Province Chiefs of Tuyen Duc and other provinces which are relatively secure should be replaced by civilian administrators.

We need to assist the Vietnamese to get their house in order. This means returning to our advisory role and to a program of defending the South from the North. The South Vietnamese must be encouraged to take the initiative against the Viet Cong, militarily as well as in the field of pacification. The responsibility for creating a viable society must be placed squarely on the Vietnamese. It will require time and patience, but if we are to succeed in our original objectives of defending South Vietnam from aggression during its period of