

**Michael Harrington**

## Getting Out of Vietnam

**P**RESIDENT NIXON'S SPEECH on November 3rd almost certainly rallied a majority of the people behind his policy. But that vote of confidence is strictly limited as to time, as on a similar occasion Lyndon Johnson discovered; and if, as seems likely, the war goes on and "Vietnamization" fails, Mr. Nixon is going to be confronted by even greater pressure for change. That is why the Moratorium after brilliant beginnings must prepare for the long haul. Almost any President, and certainly a new one, can get support for his conduct of a war the first time he goes to the country and makes a patriotic appeal. The reason for this is well-known. On issues of domestic policy, like wages or medical insurance, the average citizen can check what the President says against his own experience. But on global questions the people have few sources of information, they assume that the White House has an excellent intelligence network (even after the Bay of Pigs and Vietnam), and they join ranks behind the Commander in Chief.

But there is a catch. If the evidence becomes overwhelming that the President is wrong, if a promised victory turns into a defeat, then there can be a mass defection. In December 1967, Lyndon Johnson was going up in the opinion polls: many were hostile to the Pentagon demonstrations in October and General Westmoreland had just made the annual, optimistic analysis of the course of the conflict. But by March there had been the Tet offensive, the McCarthy campaign in New Hampshire, and Robert Kennedy's entry into the race. Johnson resigned from politics on March 31.

So Mr. Nixon's fate depends in large measure upon what happens in Vietnam. Even his hawkish speech was presented as a kind of "peace plan" with America ending its involvement either through a negotiated settlement or

"Vietnamization." And on that last count, the President's preposterous analysis of how this country got into the war makes it highly unlikely that his scenario for getting out of it will ever come to pass.

"Fifteen years ago," Mr. Nixon said, "North Vietnam, with the logistical support of Communist China and the Soviet Union, launched a campaign to impose a Communist government on South Vietnam by instigating and supporting a revolution." This notion that the war is a result of an international Communist conspiracy and an external aggression is not simply erroneous. It also makes it impossible for anyone who believes it to recognize the political realities in that tortured country. And it provides the utterly unreal premise on which "Vietnamization" is based: that "our" government in Saigon is engaged in the nationalist defense of the homeland and can therefore prevail if only provided with sufficient arms.

The reason the United States got involved in Vietnam was, first of all, the Korean War. For it was in the early fifties, when the scene of the Cold War suddenly shifted from Europe to Asia, that the French saw an opportunity to get American support for their colonial policy in Indo-China. So it was that by the time of the French defeat and withdrawal in 1954, the United States was paying around 80 percent of the cost of their imperialist venture. And some of the people on the payroll, fighting for Paris against their own countrymen, were later to turn up as our men in Saigon.

After the division of Vietnam, there was relative quiet until, in the late fifties, Diem's repression struck at the South Vietnamese nationalists. The Communists in the South, Jean Lacoture has noted, were the last to take to the *maquis* since they were sticking to the soft line established in Geneva in 1954. It was only

when Saigon had forced the nationalist opposition into armed revolt that the Communists joined up—and took over. From that moment until the present, a civil war and a Communist drive for power were inextricably, and tragically, bound together. But this development was hardly invented in Hanoi, Moscow, or Peking. It was, and is, indigenous to the political history of the South even though the other Communist powers supplied arms and, in the case of Hanoi from 1965 on, men.

In view of this history it is absurd to think that the Thieu-Ky government can suddenly improvise the political strength that would allow them to defend themselves militarily. In the last election, they got only a third of the vote in a ballot which they themselves supervised and which excluded the advocates of a negotiated settlement on the grounds that they were pro-Communist. How Mr. Nixon can think that such a clique can easily dispense with the services of half a million American soldiers is hard to understand. And, in any case, it is a brutal denouement to almost a quarter of a century of war to offer the people whom we theoretically fought to defend a prospect of more war.

But if “Vietnamization” is going to fail, what are the alternatives? Under the present circumstances the Thieu-Ky regime, which understandably hailed the Nixon speech, has no incentive to move from its effective refusal of any form of coalition with the National Liberation Front, be it in the form of an election commission or a new government. There are, to be sure, Saigon statements which accept the principle of coalition but since any South Vietnamese who takes them seriously is threatened with prison one can assume that they are, up to now, intended for American consumption.

CONSEQUENTLY, THERE IS LITTLE HOPE for a political settlement in Vietnam since the Saigon regime doesn't want one—and probably could not survive one. And, as Averell Harriman pointed out, Mr. Nixon himself brusquely rejected one of the most conciliatory statements Ho Chi Minh ever made. So all the evidence points to a continuation of the war and a failure of “Vietnamization.” That might mean that Mr. Nixon will decide to extricate himself from

the impasse in the classic, Lyndon Johnson manner: by escalation.

There are already disturbing domestic signs that such a Rightist “solution” to the Vietnam tragedy might be in the making. For the Nixon administration has been sponsoring a modest revival of Joe McCarthyism, administrative style, and if it succeeds in polarizing the society and stigmatizing the advocacy of peace as subversion, that will create the mood for an increase in the violence in Southeast Asia. Nixon himself was soft-voiced in his McCarthyite insinuation but the basic smear was still there. “North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States,” he said. “Only Americans can do that.”

This pious, prissy slander of the peace movement was followed by much more vigorous attacks from the Attorney General, the Secretary of Transportation, and the Postmaster General. The Justice Department practically sent an engraved invitation to the violence freaks on the Left to be sure and turn up and do their thing in November, and when the march, to Mr. Mitchell's chagrin, was largely peaceful, the facts were altered to fit the predictions about them. All of this was compounded by a communications policy, enunciated by Nixon's Nixon, Spiro Agnew, and by Dean Burch, in which the government used its great power to intimidate the media.

All of this is disturbing enough to read in the *New York Times* but, if I may add a personal note, it is much more frightening to experience first-hand. On November 13, I gave three speeches as part of the Moratorium. The third was held on the parking lot of a Long Island shopping center and featured Dave Livingston, the trade unionist, Congressman Allard Lowenstein, and myself. We and 300 supporters of the Moratorium holding candles were joined by 50 or so Rightists brandishing flags, chanting “Go Back to Russia, Let the Flag Speak,” and I was hit in the back of the head by a very light, not at all painful, missile, but a missile nevertheless. If there is more death and frustration in Vietnam, that McCarthyite atmosphere could become pervasive and provide the emotional justification for escalation.

But how, then, should the democratic Left respond?

Until this year, I believed that a negotiated settlement was the only way out of Vietnam.

It could, I thought, provide at least some protection for the non- and anti-Communists in South Vietnam. In any case, it was the only form of a peace proposal which the American public would accept and therefore, whatever one thought of the abstract question of unilateral withdrawal, a realistic political struggle for peace had to make negotiations its key demand. And this is what the mainstream peace movement did in its most successful effort, the McCarthy and Kennedy campaigns.

But now the situation has changed. The American people have become so weary of the war that a significant minority of perhaps 40 percent is prepared to accept the logic of withdrawal and, if the bloodshed continues, that uncommitted center which Mr. Nixon won over with his speech could come to the same conclusion. Moreover, one year of negotiations—and of death—has clearly demonstrated that

Saigon has a vested interest in subverting even the possibility of a settlement. As a result, there is a paradoxical situation: only an American commitment to withdraw can make a negotiated settlement possible.

But for such a tactic to work, the commitment to withdraw must be serious and specific. Vague promises, like the ones Mr. Nixon made, will not inspire, or threaten, Thieu and Ky. But a clear statement that all the American troops are leaving in a given period of time might. To face facts, the result of such a commitment could be to harden Hanoi and the National Liberation Front, to frustrate any agreement, and to prepare the way for an NLF take-over in the South. Moreover, if that were to take place there is a very good possibility that the mass terror employed by Ho in the North in the fifties when the peasants were forcibly collectivized, or that visited by the Viet Cong on Hue in 1968, will occur again.

That is a tragic and terrible chance. It is the direct consequence of an American policy that identified with French colonialism and its heirs in Vietnam and drove the nationalist movement into the arms of a clever, hardened Communist cadre. It demonstrates that there is no easy way to free a nation like ours from a generation of errors. And it is, under the anguished circumstances, a risk that must probably be taken.

If an American commitment to withdraw does not force negotiations, if it leads to a Communist victory and terror, that seems to me a lesser evil to the other choices. For escalation, or even a continuation of the current levels of violence, involves terror and death too (see the revelations of the horrible massacre of Vietnamese civilians by U.S. troops last year), but with no possibility of an acceptable outcome and with the real chance of provoking an international catastrophe. Moreover, these possibilities also involve the threat of a revived American McCarthyism and the certainty that our desperate social problems at home will be ignored.

There are moments—Hungary in 1956, Czechoslovakia in 1968—when democrats must stand by while freedom is repressed because armed intervention would provoke even greater evils. And in Vietnam this is even truer, since no one would care to equate Thieu and Ky with the freedom movements of Budapest and Prague. America should, of course, take all the

---

### *The Unions And Haynsworth*

*WHATEVER its ultimate consequences, the refusal of the Senate to ratify the nomination of Justice Haynsworth to the Supreme Court was a sharp rebuke to an administration that daily shows itself to be more reactionary and deceitful. Behind the Senate's action was an extremely well-organized lobbying effort by the AFL-CIO and the NAACP, the two "traditional" bulwarks of the ruptured labor-liberal-Negro alliance. Every Washington commentator agrees that the campaign to expose Haynsworth's political outlook and public record was largely the work of these organizations.*

*Perhaps there is a point here worth reflection by people on the Left. There is, God knows, plenty to criticize in the recent conduct of the trade unions concerning Vietnam. But it seems utterly foolish and self-defeating for people on the Left to keep repeating, as one hears them do, that the unions have simply become "conservative." On many crucial domestic issues they remain a major force for progress. If a viable electoral bloc is to be reconstituted in order to defeat Nixon and all he stands for, the unions and groups like the NAACP will have to be major segments of it. Meanwhile, those of us who have at some points been critical of the unions ought to have the grace to say that in rallying sentiment against Haynsworth, both Roy Wilkins and George Meany did a fine job.*

—I. H.

---

steps to provide safety for those who believed in the promises we never should have made, the scoundrels among them included. We should offer the chance of emigration to America to anyone who wants to take it. But we must get out and soon.

The policy I advocate is not without its ambiguities and perils, yet it is the only hope I can see for ending the horror in Southeast Asia. There will be difficult times ahead and yet the new-found confidence of Nixon and his bully boys should not intimidate us. For if the Nixon policy fails, as I think it will, America will have to settle with this issue for once and for all, and will desperately need a vigorous peace movement to help it do so.

Nicolaus C. Mills

*Strikebreaking  
By the Pentagon*

**I**N 1966, the year before Cesar Chavez's United Farm Workers Organizing Committee began its national boycott of California grapes, South Vietnam was the world's 23rd largest importer of fresh table grapes from America. Today it is the world's fifth largest importer, a figure that puts its consumption patterns well beyond those of most European nations. The reason for this change is not difficult to locate. Despite an official policy of neutrality, the Defense Department has become one of the major supporters of California grape growers. In the last fiscal year alone, fresh grape purchases for all armed services were increased by 50 percent and for troops in Vietnam by 350 percent!

For the United Farm Workers, who are still excluded from the protection of the National Labor Relations Act and from equal coverage under the minimum wage law, the federal government has long been a thorn in the side of organizing. But Defense Department purchases of grapes are in excess of anything UFWOC expected. They represent 2.4 percent of all

fresh grape production in the U.S., a percentage capable of shoring up prices on three to four times that number of grapes and of seriously hampering a boycott that has struggled to reduce grape shipments to 36 major cities in the country by as much as 20 percent.

UFWOC's indignation that the Defense Department should, as UFWOC's vice-president Dolores Huerta charged, be "acting as a buyer of last resort for scab grapes," is shared by many others. Senator Walter Mondale says:

It may well be that the policy of the Defense Department is a neutral one, but it is a neutrality that obviously favors the growers in the labor dispute surrounding the grape strike today.

I think it is asking too much of the average farm worker [to tell him] to believe that the Defense Department is being neutral when it . . . is buying more table grapes than at any time in the history of the Defense Department, and has responded by saying they have solicited telegram requests to all points around the world urging their [food procurement officers'] consideration of the use of table grapes.

ALONG WITH these unprecedented purchases of grapes, the Department has taken the following steps during the California grape boycott:

(1) recommending grapes and only grapes as a substitute fruit when a shortage of oranges developed, although other citrus fruits might also have been recommended;

(2) giving "high troop acceptability" as a primary reason for choosing grapes as a substitute fruit when virtually all fresh fruits have "high troop acceptability";

(3) having as its number one grape contractor, Giumarra Vineyards Corporation, the company against which UFWOC began its strike and the leading antiunion grower in the San Joaquin Valley (39 of the first 40 growers used by the Defense Department are also from California);

(4) ignoring the fact that the low cost and wide availability of grapes are directly related to the California grape boycott and attributing increased Defense Department purchases to "normal factors of supply and demand";

(5) awarding contracts to growers who have been convicted of illegally recruiting migrant workers and violating health and safety standards.