"A ROUTE FOR THE ENEMY TO ESCAPE," --
HANOI'S VIEW OF THE CEASEFIRE

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May 1973
The Rand Paper Series

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When Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho meet in Paris this month, they probably will discuss, among other things, varying interpretations of the ceasefire agreement. The North Vietnamese interpretation of what was agreed to in Paris three months ago may not coincide with our own. The lack of agreement of how the war in Indochina was to end— or was supposed to end—could be caused by fundamental differences in our approaches to war itself.

Few can now remember the date the ceasefire in Vietnam was signed. The end of the war has proved as unmemorable as its beginning. When did the war begin? On March 8, 1965, when the Marines landed at Danang? Or was it August 2, 1964, when the destroyer Maddox was "attacked"? Or was it July 9, 1959, when the first American advisors were killed by Viet Cong guerillas? The campaign ribbon given by the Vietnamese government to its own and to our soldiers who served in Vietnam read, "1960- ." Now at last, the other half can be filled in. But what happened in 1960? What potential day of infamy is now so thoroughly forgotten?

The Department of Defense decided with bureaucratic precision that American forces officially entered hostilities in Vietnam on July 4, 1965 — the hour was not specified. What happened on July 4 to deserve this dubious honor? Nothing. The date was chosen arbitrarily. Nor was it really the beginning since the Defense Department had already decided four years previously that Vietnam had officially been a combat zone, or at least an imminent combat zone — one could be shot at — ever since July 1, 1958 — another arbitrary date. How difficult it was to fight a long war, our longest war, with so obscure a beginning.
Our preoccupation with dates, I believe, goes beyond the bureaucratic requirements of deciding who may draw combat pay and who may wear which campaign ribbons. War to Americans is regarded as a finite undertaking. There is a precise beginning to war, December 7, 1941, for example, and a precise end, with a winner and loser, and a contractual agreement to prove it. After war, the armies are demobilized; the people return to peaceful pursuits. The problems of war are followed by and are separable from the problems of peace. There is war and there is postwar.

In Indochina, not only have we fought a back-dated war. We now have a post-dated peace. As expected, the ceasefire has not ended the fighting. Military activity continues. The term "postwar" may be appropriate for us to use, signifying an end to direct American participation in the war (except for the use of American airpower in Laos and Cambodia), but it is misleading when applied to Indochina's future. The conflict in Indochina will go on in other forms, perhaps something less than war, but certainly not peace. That our involvement terminates without a solution to the war is disturbing to many Americans. It is contrary to the American view of the way things happen, to our own view of history.

Americans like to view history sequentially, a steady advance toward the achievement of goals. This is in accord with our own history which is that of a people landing on the shore of the continent, establishing a government, advancing to the other shore, and perfecting the government. General Electric could not be more American in advertising that "Progress is our most important product." It should be our national motto. Progress and development are key words in our concept of history. To chart progress we arrange our history chronologically, like a corporation sales graph, with phaselines at 1776, 1865, 1917, 1945, and so on.

Reading Vietnamese history, one has the feeling he is watching a movie that he has seen fifteen times before. Like a neighborhood theater, Vietnamese history provides continuous performances of the same show. The Vietnamese view their own history that way. For them, it is cyclical. Patterns recur again and again. Only the
actors change -- never the script. The Vietnamese are aware of their own historical traditions. They regard them as powerful. They know the scripts. Dates are less important to the Vietnamese. History is sliced lengthwise like French bread instead of crosswise at dates to chart progress through the loaf.

It is in the context of ancient quarrels that we must view the present situation in Indochina. Although cloaked in the language of rival ideologies and fought with modern weapons, the war in Indochina is very much the continuation of those ancient quarrels, of long-held ambitions, and of persistent patterns of conflict.

That is the way the North Vietnamese view things. For the North Vietnamese, the war began over 2,000 years ago. At least, that is the way they like to portray their current struggle against "outside aggression" and "reactionaries within the country," to use their terms. For them, the problems created by the war against the Americans, the still unresolved struggle to defeat the "reactionaries" in Saigon and reunify Vietnam are not new. The Vietnamese usually faced enemies that were numerically and technologically superior, and who had far vaster resources. They developed their own strategy to deal with such problems.

What Vietnamese emperors or Vietnamese rebels did in the Sixth Century or the Fifteenth Century is an inspiration and a guide to the North Vietnamese today. And how they write that history now is a guide to us as to how they view the current situation.

A recent article written at the Institute of Military Study in Hanoi, entitled "The Outstanding Skill in Strategy of Our Ancestors," in particular the part entitled, "The Method of Concluding a War," may tell us how North Vietnamese leaders see the current ceasefire and the future struggle.*

*"The Outstanding Skill in Strategy of Our Ancestors" was published in two parts in the Communist Party's principal theoretical journal Hôc Tạp, Nos. 11 and 12, November and December 1972. It was translated by the Joint Publications Research Service of the U.S. Department of Commerce in Translations on North Vietnam, Nos. 1307 (January 3, 1973) and 1335 (February 21, 1973).
"In the process of inflicting...defeats upon the enemy, we began, when we had reached a certain point, to talk with the enemy in order to seize an opportunity for ending the war -- or, at the very least, open an 'escape route' for the enemy.... Finally, on the basis of the military victory which had been won, we continued to negotiate and force the enemy to withdraw their troops.

"After fighting the [enemy] army until it had lost its determination, lost its strength...[General] Le Loi [the victorious commander,] opened the road for them to return to their country by means of a troop withdrawal conference.

"Our delegations [to the conference] took with them pardons, expressions of good will.... However, in addition, they also took with them...long rosters of the...prisoners who had been...captured by us in battle.... They were clearly the envoys of a victorious nation. They did not have to kneel down and beg for peace.... And the prisoners we release and send back to their country are clear proof of the undisputable defeat of the enemy." (These passages, incidentally, refer to a war fought in the Fifteenth Century.)

Military victory allows talks with the defeated and tired enemy -- a way is opened for the enemy to escape -- a troop withdrawal conference -- lists of the POWs are presented -- their release is clear proof of the indisputable defeat of the enemy. Are they really talking about the Fifteenth Century?

Certainly one can detect in the article, which was published in November 1972, after negotiations for a ceasefire were already well along, a conscious effort on the part of North Vietnamese military historians to put the best face on current developments from the army's point of view. The leaders of the North Vietnamese government probably do not delude themselves by thinking that the accords signed in Paris give them everything they wanted. But for the North Vietnamese, who have consistently portrayed their fight against the Americans as a continuation of their fight against the French, the withdrawal of American troops does represent a victory. Speaking before a special session of the National Assembly in February of this year, North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong used the word "victory" 33 times!
The North Vietnamese can now claim to have driven all "imperialist" forces out of Vietnam.

This "victory," however, is not coterminous with the end of the struggle, or with the achievement -- or abandonment -- of Hanoi's long range objectives, namely the reunification of North and South Vietnam and the imposition of Socialism throughout the country. The North Vietnamese scenario to achieve these objectives may now run something like this: Military victory by the North Vietnamese armed forces has resulted in a ceasefire and the end of direct American participation in the conflict (but does not inhibit North Vietnamese participation). That victory, which is demonstrated by a "troop withdrawal conference," by a ceasefire, and by the return of American POWs, will be followed by a political struggle. As good Marxists, the North Vietnamese believe that historical forces will prevail in that struggle: Without American troops to prop them up, the reactionaries in Saigon will inevitably fall, opening the way for peaceful reunification.

So what we may regard as the end of the war followed by peace with honor, the North Vietnamese regard as a victory followed by further struggle. The struggle could be peaceful, but only if the North Vietnamese are able to dominate the situation. If not, the struggle probably will again become violent.

How long will it go on? Several years, perhaps several decades. North Vietnamese leaders, who have already struggled for thirty and forty years, have a much longer view of things than we do. For us, eight or nine years is a long war while they comfortably talk of centuries of struggle. This does give them a certain advantage.

To say that they have a long range view of things, however, is not to say that they are operating according to a master plan -- a blueprint for takeover -- which once we fathom will allow us to predict their actions. The North Vietnamese have long range objectives which remain fixed, but they can postpone the achievement of these objectives without abandoning them. They have plans which, like all plans, can be changed. And they have a doctrine flexible enough to explain setbacks and allow necessary shifts in policy -- flexible enough to allow differences of opinion among North Vietnamese leaders, which, I suspect, may sometimes generate considerable debate.
What about the future? North Vietnamese units remain deployed throughout Indochina. There is no sign that they will be withdrawn. Nor is Hanoi likely to abandon its support of anti-government forces in Laos, Cambodia, and South Vietnam. Insurgent activity and violent political contests will probably continue in all three countries.

The North Vietnamese, I believe, are determined to maintain military pressure on their opponents, but at less cost to themselves. While the Paris accords may be viewed in Hanoi as an "escape route" for the Americans, the same accords also allow North Vietnam to reduce its own investment.

Since the beginning of the ceasefire in Vietnam, articles in the North Vietnamese press and radio broadcasts from Hanoi have repeatedly emphasized that North Vietnam faces a "new situation" with "new tasks." Much greater emphasis is placed on reconstruction and on economic development in the North than in the past, implying a lower investment in the war in the South. This contrasts markedly with last year's harangues to fight now, work later, and it is hardly the message the government would use to prepare the North Vietnamese people for the sacrifices of another military offensive.

The political contest with the Viet Cong, the threat posed by the North Vietnamese forces within or just beyond South Vietnam's borders, and the military weakness of Laos and Cambodia will compel South Vietnam to remain fully mobilized. Defense expenditures will continue to consume the major part of its resources. Insecurity and the heavy defense burden will hamper South Vietnam's development. Meanwhile, North Vietnam can rebuild, and grow stronger, emerging ultimately as the most powerful nation of Indochina, and easily capable of dominating its Southern rival.

These could be the broad outlines of North Vietnam's current strategy. It leaves plenty of room for maneuver. There is only one rule, that is, to avoid the resumption of full-scale hostilities with South Vietnam, which would require a much higher North Vietnamese military investment, and which could provoke American retaliation.

There are several possible exceptions to this rule: South Vietnam, in strength or in desperation, might itself renew hostilities.
The Viet Cong might be threatened with annihilation by South Vietnamese government forces. Or the North Vietnamese might be willing to risk limited military actions such as a sudden tactical advance to capture a district or provincial capital in which the Provisional Revolutionary Government could establish its own capital. If the advance achieved initial success, the proponents of a more vigorous military line would immediately argue in favor of going all the way.

If North Vietnam wishes to avoid the resumption of full-scale conventional hostilities, why then are North Vietnamese forces in the South being reinforced with men, with tanks and artillery, and with anti-aircraft weapons to an unprecedented level? How does one explain the apparent contradiction between the government's words to its own people and its military buildup in the field? Several interpretations are possible:

The most obvious one is that North Vietnam's leaders see no contradictions at all in their actions. Primary attention will be devoted to building the North, but at the same time army units in the South must be strengthened to provide adequate military muscle for the Provisional Revolutionary Government, and to guard against any offensive that may be launched by the South Vietnamese government.

A second interpretation rests upon momentum. Shutting down any large-scale military enterprise is a difficult task. Men and supplies scheduled for deployment or already in the pipeline continue moving to the front long after the switch is turned off. Not everybody, especially those in the field, gets the word that military activities, except those of a defensive nature, are to halt. And some subordinate commanders may deliberately choose to interpret "defensive operations" rather broadly.

A third possibility is that hawks in Hanoi who favor a tougher military line in the South have been given enough leeway to pursue their own course of action so long as it does not jeopardize the achievement of nonmilitary objectives at home. In other words, the desire to amortize the war in the South and focus on building the North is sincere. It is probably the prevailing view. But its proponents may not be able, or may not wish to prevent the hawks from pursuing their own line.
The contradictory courses may even be the result of a compromise among Hanoi's leaders. This is far more serious than simply allowing the hawks some latitude, for it suggests the issue of whether or not to continue the war at a high level is, for the time being, an irreconcilable one in North Vietnam, and that hawks who favor a more militant posture are too powerful to be stopped. An extreme interpretation along this line would be that the military buildup directly contravenes Party orders -- the army is disobedient.

I tend to favor an interpretation which entails some disagreement but not outright disobedience by the army. If that interpretation is correct, then the debate over strategy will continue in Hanoi. The Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese army probably will argue for a stronger military line. Others will argue against a high investment in the war. It is not the classic argument between hawks and doves, since there is little disagreement about long-range objectives. The debate can be described more properly as near-sighted hawks versus far-sighted hawks, for none of them consider the struggle to be over.