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WHY THE NORTH VIETNAMESE KEEP FIGHTING

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SUMMARY

The North Vietnamese are flexible but determined. Their flexibility lies in what military strategy they will pursue and where they will direct their next thrust. To a lesser degree, they have some flexibility in their timetable. Whether they should continue the war or abandon their struggle does not arise in any debate, certainly not in public. Even behind closed doors the arguments in favor of continuing the war, if it were even necessary to marshal them, are formidable. Among them are arguments inherent in the Confucian upbringing and communist ideology of Hanoi's leaders, the historical experience of the Vietnamese and the reluctance of the old men in Hanoi to abandon a course of action that has been the mission of their entire adult lives. The losses to the North Vietnamese are not insupportable and the prize, should they win, is great. Abandoning the war involves political risks for Hanoi's leaders individually, and may involve greater risks for North Vietnam should China decide to continue its support for the war even if North Vietnam decides to quit. The question of what to do with the North Vietnamese army if the war is abandoned may constitute another source of apprehension for Hanoi's leaders. The prospects for the future are for the North Vietnamese to continue fighting somehow, somewhere, and for some time.

The public statements of North Vietnam's leaders make one thing clear -- the war will be continued. Their belligerent posture may be more than propaganda designed to dismay their opponents and keep spirits high at home. Hanoi's apparent determination to go on fighting probably reflects arguments that in their eyes seem correct -- so correct that in choosing to fight, the alternative of not fighting at all may be inconceivable.

Confucian doctrine permeates the arguments put forth by the Vietnamese communists. Terms such as "a just cause," and "legitimate government," dominate the speech of their leaders. The Vietnamese communists firmly believe that they possess the "Mandate of Heaven" to rule all Vietnam and therefore eventually must emerge victorious. To abandon the struggle or to accept any other outcome as permanent, in their eyes would be immoral, just as our support of a South Vietnamese government which, from Hanoi's point of view, does not possess the "Mandate of Heaven" must be immoral. At first, it seems surprising that the adherents of communism, a political doctrine of recent origin, could at the same time seriously adhere to an ancient political doctrine such as the "Mandate of Heaven." Are not communists modernists rather than traditionalist?

In the case of Vietnam, the answer is no. In Vietnam, the communists often appear more traditionalist than their opponents. The "Workers Party of Vietnam" -- the Communist Party -- is led by men and women who are not workers, but rather the descendents of Confucian scholars, many of whom participated in the traditionalist and pro-monarchist resistance movements against the French in the late nineteenth century. Ho Chi Minh himself was the son of a Confucian scholar who served the emperor as a minor mandarin. So are Pham Van Dong, North Vietnam's prime minister, General Vo Nguyen Giap, the defense minister, and Xuan Thuy, Hanoi's chief negotiator in Paris the sons of Confucian scholars. Nguyen Thi Binh, the chief delegate of the Provisional Revolutionary Government, is the granddaughter of a famous Vietnamese scholar who led demonstrations against the French shortly after World War I.

The "Mandate of Heaven" is the right to rule which is conferred upon a man, a group of men, or a party, by heaven. It was the source of political legitimacy claimed by all Chinese and Vietnamese emperors. According to the Vietnamese Communists, the "Mandate of Heaven" was passed to them by Bao Dai, the last emperor of Vietnam, in 1945 when he willingly gave his ceremonial seal and sword to the representatives of Ho Chi Minh.* From the moment of this transfer, the struggle waged by the Viet Minh and its successors, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the National Liberation Front, was a moral right and a duty, and to challenge it is immoral. Possession of the "Mandate of Heaven" guarantees eventual victory, just as the communist interpretation of history guarantees the inevitable victory of communist ideology. Since the Vietnamese Communists believe they have the "Mandate of Heaven," they must believe they will win. To accept defeat would be to accept that the "Mandate of Heaven" does not work; it would compromise the philosophy upon which Hanoi's leaders have based their entire lives.

With the "Mandate of Heaven" to legitimize their struggle, the Vietnamese Communists must also possess a proper strategy to win the war. The strategy chosen by them comes from their own history, and it suggests that the present war will be long. Usually faced with enemies who were vastly superior in numbers, such as the Chinese, or vastly superior in technology such as the French and the Americans, the Vietnamese developed the only resources they had: a terrain suitable for resistance warfare and *time*. The way that the Vietnamese have won wars throughout their own history is by fighting for a long time after their opponents thought they would have called it quits. According to our conventional view of warfare, two armies engage in a series of battles which one side wins and the other side loses, and rather than incur further losses, the losing side accepts the outcome and sues for peace. But if the losing side ignores its

* For a Vietnamese interpretation of the "Mandate of Heaven" and its possession by the Communists, see Tran Van Dinh, "The Other Side of the Table," *The Washington Monthly*, January 1970.

losses (and if the winners somehow are prevented from inflicting further punishment), this concept is negated. In that case, the winning side must keep on winning, a costly undertaking, until eventually a point is reached at which the winning side judges it unreasonable to incur further losses itself and therefore, not having the tenacity of the Vietnamese, withdraws. Tenacity is the way Vietnamese win their wars. They successfully resisted seven attempts by the Chinese to occupy their territory. The resistance struggle against the Mongols lasted thirty-one years during which the Vietnamese alternately pursued a strategy of fighting and negotiating. The resistance campaign led by the emperor Le Loi in the fifteenth century lasted for ten years. The Vietnamese are fond of pointing out that it took the French seventy-one years to pacify Vietnam.* The war to throw out the French lasted eight. Le Loi's ten-year campaign may provide some clues to understanding the current situation. After four years of fighting, Le Loi launched a series of disastrous attacks on the Chinese which nearly destroyed his army. To prevent further deterioration of his situation, he pretended to sue for peace and thus obtained a truce which allowed him to withdraw his troops and rebuild his strength. Two years later, he launched his army in a surprise attack on the Chinese forces and after four years of continued fighting, the Chinese themselves finally sued for peace.

The communists have skillfully attached themselves to Vietnam's tradition of tenacious warfare. During the war against the French, the Viet Minh named their military campaigns after heroes of earlier resistance campaigns against the Chinese. Military authors in North Vietnam continue to hold up the ancient heroes as examples meaningful in the current struggle.

One should not assume that the tenacity of the Vietnamese was confined to resistance against foreign invaders. An earlier attempt by North Vietnam to bring South Vietnam under its control produced a

* Anti-French resistance movements continued in one part of the country or another almost continuously from 1859, when the French first landed at Saigon, to 1930 when a widespread nationalist revolt was suppressed.

war in the seventeenth century that lasted forty-six years. The Vietnamese conquest of the ancient kingdom of Champa took several centuries to complete. Ho Chi Minh's claim that the Vietnamese would continue to fight for another fifteen to twenty years, longer if necessary, was no idle boast. He was describing a strategy which has proven successful in the past, and which Hanoi's present leaders may regard as the only way the current war can be won.

The notion that North Vietnam's enormous personnel losses must cause it to soon abandon its efforts should be examined carefully. Their losses, while enormous, are not insupportable. According to our official figures, the enemy (both the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong) have lost slightly over 600,000 men since the war began. General Giap, last year, openly admitted to having lost a half-million men.* Whether or not Giap actually said he lost a half-million men, and if so, whether or not out of bravado, he was making the point that even if North Vietnam did lose a half-million men they would not abandon the struggle, we do not know. Nor are we certain how many of the 600,000 men lost were Viet Cong (subtracted from South Vietnam's population) or North Vietnamese regulars. If we assume that the figure is roughly correct and that one-half were North Vietnamese, then the net loss to North Vietnam was 300,000 dead over a period of five years, the bulk of which were killed in the costly offensives of 1968 and early 1969. The enemy currently loses about 2,000 men a week on South Vietnam. Since one-half to three-quarters of the enemy's forces in South Vietnam are said to be North Vietnamese, we can assume something like an annual loss of 50,000 to 75,000 men to North Vietnam, or no more than 3/8 of one percent of its total population. Because of its high birth rate, North Vietnam's population is estimated to increase at 3.6 percent a year. Thus, from these figures, although admittedly crude, the belief that North Vietnam will at some point run out of men to send into battle seems unwarranted.

* Interview with General Giap by Oriana Fallaci, *The Washington Post*, April 6, 1969.

Of course, there are other types of attrition, the one of most significance militarily being the attrition of trained cadres. I cannot say with any certainty how many of its combat leaders North Vietnam is losing, nor how quickly it can replace them. Nevertheless, North Vietnam *has* kept the war going for five years so far (since 1964 when North Vietnam began infiltrating its own men in large numbers), and if the pressure gets too great, North Vietnam can reduce its military activities and thereby cut its losses. Since the enemy has the ability to initiate battles when he desires or avoid them when he desires, he has more control over the rate at which he loses men than we do.

Actually, the burden of continuing the war seems to be greater on South Vietnam than it is on North Vietnam. South Vietnam's requirement to defend the entire country takes more men than the enemy needs to attack it at points he selects. And South Vietnam's style of warfare, learned from us, compels it, with a smaller population than North Vietnam, to field an army more than twice the size of North Vietnam's armed forces. In addition, recruits for the Viet Cong are drawn out of the same pool of able-bodied men as the army of South Vietnam. South Vietnam must suffer the losses it inflicts on the native Viet Cong as well as those incurred in the forces on the government side. The civilians killed in the war further drain South Vietnam's population. The burden on the South Vietnamese population, however, is not only the number of casualties, but the enormous size of its armed establishment. One out of every eight men is a soldier. Already the massive mobilization of South Vietnam's manpower has caused grave social and economic problems in the south.

Economically and militarily, North Vietnam will be able to continue the war as long as China and the Soviet Union continue to underwrite its economy and provide it with the materiel it needs for its army. They both have agreed to do so for at least another year. While details of the most recent trade and assistance agreements were not spelled out, China will continue to give North Vietnam nonrefundable economic and military assistance in 1970, while the Soviet Union promised to provide fertilizer, machinery, food, medical supplies,

vehicles, and, most importantly, arms and ammunition. In addition, the Soviet Union also granted North Vietnam long-term credits to rebuild its economy which had been disrupted by the bombing. Arriving in Peking, which is reported to favor a long war in Vietnam, to negotiate the 1970 aid agreements, Hanoi's delegates received a noticeably warmer reception than the previous year. Both governments gave much publicity to Sino-Vietnamese solidarity, also a contrast to the previous year.

There may be an element of blackmail in China's support of North Vietnam's ambitions in Indochina. China may regard North Vietnam as a convenient vehicle for advancing its own designs in Southeast Asia. At the very least, it has proven a cheap method of keeping U.S. military power tied down. If North Vietnam should tire of its role, there remains the possibility that China will continue its support for the Viet Cong anyway. The Viet Cong may yet prove more bellicose than North Vietnam. By now, those still fighting have little to lose by continuing the war, and a lifetime of effort to lose if they quit. The particularly warm reception and special considerations shown to the representatives of the National Liberation Front when they visited Peking, an even warmer reception than that received by Hanoi's representatives themselves, may have caused the North Vietnamese to wonder if the Chinese had intentions of picking up the strings of the National Liberation Front, if Hanoi itself were to drop them. The Chinese road-building activities in northern Laos, perceived by some to be the beginnings of a long thrust into Laos and Cambodia, the weakest spot in the ring of anti-Chinese governments that line China's periphery, lends some credence to this theory. A road from China through northern Laos could eventually link up somewhere with the Ho Chi Minh Trail and thus provide China a way of continuing its support of the Viet Cong in case North Vietnam quits. North Vietnam's historic relationship with China includes both a willingness to follow China's lead and a fear of the Chinese as traditional enemies of the Vietnamese. North Vietnam is likely to do nothing that would increase Chinese influence in North Vietnam or with the Viet Cong. Thus, North Vietnam,

even if it did wish to quit, could find itself dragged along by the Viet Cong and nudged by China.

The prize is great. To dominate the Southeast Asian mainland, or more specifically, the territory once encompassed in French Indochina is an ambition of many Vietnamese nationalists, northern and southern, communist or not. A Vietnamese paper claimed in 1939, "We will have the space we need. . . . One day Indochina will no longer be a collection of separate and distinct countries, but a single country impregnated with Vietnamese blood, inspired by Vietnamese dynamism and power of action." A Vietnamese-dominated Indochina, with a total population of some fifty million, would easily be the dominant power in the peninsula, and given the industriousness that the Vietnamese seem to possess, it could easily become the dominant power of Southeast Asia. Expansion for North Vietnam may be more than just a dream. Considering North Vietnam's lack of available riceland and rapidly growing population, expansion may appear to Hanoi's leaders as an economic necessity. In suggesting that the North Vietnamese give up the war and remain within their present borders, one should ask what else would they give up by doing so. In this case, they would give up a great deal.

In his Will, Ho Chi Minh, who himself had fought for four decades, urged his countrymen to continue the war. Ho Chi Minh died a man venerated by all his people. Who among Hanoi's present leaders would risk the betrayal of Ho Chi Minh by suggesting that the war now be abandoned or even postponed? In the current struggle for power among North Vietnam's leaders, no man has yet emerged with sufficient control over the party and government to bring about such a dramatic reversal of policy even if he so desired. As long as the power remains diffused in a collective leadership, Hanoi is likely to continue the war. The war will continue by itself unless an effort were made to stop it and such an effort would be full of political risks. What we do not seem to realize is that "losing" a war may be as politically unfeasible for North Vietnam's leadership as it is for our own. Postponement, with some commitment to future action, probably is the most

that any North Vietnamese leader could obtain if that leader, if indeed the collective leadership, were to survive.

The prospects of a long postponement are not good. Hanoi's leaders are for the most part old men. The average age of the ruling politburo members is sixty-one.* To postpone the struggle for five or ten years is, for many of them, to perhaps abandon hope of ever seeing victory. Old age and rigidity of views are not always coincident, but these particular old men have spent all of their adult lives fighting. Many of them spent years living in caves during the war against the French, and they continued to fight when all around them seemed blackest. The present politburo is made up of the survivors of the struggle against the French, those who kept fighting when others quit, and who saw their determination rewarded with the withdrawal of the French.

The present leadership of North Vietnam might not survive a decision to stop the war. Assuming they survived the hawks in Hanoi and whatever pressures China might choose to bring against them, North Vietnam would still have the problem of what to do with its own army. Some observers already have observed the possibilities of divergent views within the military leadership of North Vietnam; for example, the continued rivalry between General Vo Nguyen Giap and General Truong Chinh over how the war should be fought, and potential splits between the lower echelon field officers who have done the bulk of fighting in the south and the senior staff officers who remained in the north.** For the past four or five years, one-fourth to one-third of North Vietnam's army has been stationed outside of the country, sustaining casualties and putting up with hardships that those in Hanoi did not have to suffer, with the exception of the period during

* Le Duan is 63; Truong Chinh, 62; Pham Van Dong, 64; Pham Hung, 58; Vo Nguyen Giap, 58; Le Duc Tho, 60; Nguyen Duy Trinh, 60; Le Thanh Nghi, 59; and Hoang Van Hoan, 65.

** This possibility is raised by William S. Turley, "Civil-Military Relations in North Vietnam," *Asian Survey*, Vol. IX, No. 12, December 1969, pp. 878-99.

the bombing. North Vietnam's leaders may not be thrilled at the prospect of bringing this army home -- in defeat!

In the eyes of North Vietnam's leaders, to continue the war seems the right course of action. The "Mandate of Heaven" makes it just, and tenacity seems the correct course of action. History has demonstrated its correctness. It is costly to do so but the losses are not insupportable. The prize is great, and the leaders themselves already have proved their determination. On the other hand, abandoning the struggle may be politically risky at the present moment. It also encourages a traditional enemy, China, to assume a greater role in the Indochinese peninsula, and conceivably it could produce political difficulties at home caused by the alienation of the hawks in Hanoi and the return of an army in defeat.

While to Hanoi victory in the south may seem more remote now than it ever was, there remain powerful arguments to continue fighting. This does not negate the possibility of considerable flexibility as to how to continue fighting -- whether by protracted guerrilla warfare, by launching periodic devastating but debilitating offensives, or by some combination of both. Nor does Hanoi's determination to continue fighting negate flexibility as to where. South Vietnam probably will remain the ultimate prize, but both Laos and Cambodia, the latter especially since the overthrow of Sihanouk, are fields of endeavor for an army that is to be kept busy and battle-ready. Nor does determination to continue negate some flexibility in time. A postponement of the fighting, or more likely, a scaling down of the fighting for one or two years would allow North Vietnam to rest and rebuild, the Americans to tire of their own president, and antiwar pressure in the United States to build up again. Postponement has its risks, too, foremost among them the worry that South Vietnam's government will be able to consolidate its power, and the Viet Cong infrastructure, believed to be a requisite to North Vietnamese military activities in the south, will be destroyed. That, however, is an argument between those who advocate some form of offensive in the near future and those who would risk waiting a year or two. That the war should be carried on is not a part of the debate. In Hanoi, it may not yet be a debatable issue.