

EDWIN REISCHAUER AND THE CHOICE ON THE WAR

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While Mr. Reischauer begins his remarkable analysis** by indicating that "this is not a book about Vietnam" (p. 3), it is only on that country that I shall follow him here, and only on points or formulations with which I disagree. To them (designated by "R") I shall present alternatives ("A"), without being able to show in these pages why evidence seems to me, on balance, to support the latter. Like Mr. Reischauer, "I put forward these... views...with some diffidence, because I am not an expert either on Vietnam or on military matters" (pp. 18-19).

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** Edwin O. Reischauer, Beyond Vietnam: The United States and Asia, New York, 1967.

THE PAST

R: It "seems highly probable" to Mr. Reischauer that a Vietnam in which the Communist Party had consolidated the control it had won in the summer of 1945 (rather than, first, losing much of it) would have developed a "relation to China not unlike that of Tito's Yugoslavia towards the Soviet Union"; also because "Ho, like Tito, had had cordial relations with us" (p. 30).

A: Mr. Reischauer's alternative history seems highly probable to me, too. But the particular factor quoted last -- whatever "cordial" here means -- appears to me unrelated both to the conjectured course of events in Asia and to the actual development in Europe.

R: A Vietnam under Communist control from 1945 on would have been "paying lip service" to China (p. 31).

A: Even that is not too probable. There is no traditional dogma in Asian Communism affirming the Chinese Party's superiority; and the Vietnamese Party probably feels its record (including a seizure of power in its entire country at a moment when the Chinese still seemed far from that level of success) to be at least as impressive as that of its Northern neighbor against whom no foreigner intervened since 1945.

R: In 1945 Ho "apparently" expected our continued "friendship" (p. 30).

A: Ho does not seriously conceive of "friendship" with the leading state of the non-"socialist" world. No evidence is available which would allow us to guess what Ho at the end of the Second World War expected the

course of his relations with Washington to be. He had more to "hope" for in economic aid from us than from China (ibid.)? Our capacity for aid was larger, but what about our intention, actual or predicted by Ho?

R: "The United States...gave no indication at Geneva [in 1954] that it would oppose the elections [scheduled for 1956 to decide on the unification of Vietnam]" (p. 24).

A: It was hard to believe, and was little believed, that the United States would do anything but "oppose" them if a date were ever set: the majority of the voters (in the North) would have been under totalitarian control. That such elections "would throw the South into the hands of the Vietminh" was not an "assumption" (p. 25) but a certainty. To say that "our greatest and most obvious blunder" was not to "support the Geneva agreements" in this regard (p. 31), is to assert it to be a grave mistake not to vindicate the totalitarian practice of elections by American "support."

R: The leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party, ruling the North from the summer of 1954 on, was "outraged" by the "flouting" of the Geneva agreements with regard to elections (p. 26).

A: The moment any such leader sensed in himself any attachment to pacta sunt servanda, or any depth of outrage about anything an enemy does, he would feel shattered about his own "degeneration." The leaders in question did not expect Diem, or anybody else attempting to rule from Saigon, to aspire to ceremonial suicide by pressing

for elections, about which they themselves were, to borrow Mr. Reischauer's words about these years, "curiously passive" (pp. 26-27).

R: A consequence of our "underwriting...[Diem's] refusal to go through with the unification of Vietnam" was that the Party's (I shall use this word to designate the Vietnamese Communist Party) "animosity towards us increased" (p. 31, my emphasis).

A: Our support of Diem's refusal to transfer the South to the Party's domain by the election mentioned in the Geneva agreements increased the Party's expectation of a conflict with us.

R: One component of the Southern rebellion in the later fifties was "organized" activity by "Southern Vietminh" (p. 27).

A: The dominant contribution to the insurgents' organization was and is furnished by the Party, which maintains much centralization despite the country's division, and whose leadership is "Northern" mainly in the sense that national headquarters are in the North where the Party rules. Much of the "organized" activity by "Southern Vietminh" in the later fifties is likely to have been in conformity with policy set by the Central Committee of the all-national Party.

R: The return to the South of Southern Vietminh who had gone North after the Geneva agreements began after the announcement, in late 1960, that a "National Liberation Front" had been founded in the South (p. 27).

A: It began before.

THE TWO REGIMES

R: After the Party's conquest of power in the North its policies produced "agrarian unrest" (p. 27).

A: At that time the Party destroyed -- fully, in an economic sense and to a considerable extent, in a physical sense -- the well-to-do farmers; with a severity at least equalling, say, the "liquidation of the kulaks as a class" in the Soviet Union of the late twenties.

R: In May 1963 a "serious" Buddhist "uprising" broke out in the South, and in the spring of 1966 a "large scale" one (pp. 27-28).

A: These were less than what is ordinarily meant by an uprising.

R: Diem's suppression of Vietminh remnants and of "all open opponents" was "ruthless"; it made "something of a police state" of the South (p. 26).

A: If these (proper) words be chosen to describe Diem's conduct, other terms should perhaps be selected to designate the higher level of threats raised and damage inflicted by the Party, before and after conquest of power; and I have missed in Mr. Reischauer's account a sentence which would be a full counterpart to the one quoted. When he speaks of the Party's "dictatorial, oppressive" rule in the North (p. 29), the reader little informed about Vietnam may gain the impression that in the author's view North and South are coercing their citizens to about the same degree. Indeed, Mr. Reischauer follows his conjecture that a Vietnam under the Party's control since 1945 "would probably not have been something

we would have approved of" with the reminder that "we have not found much we could approve of" in the South either (p. 29).

THE BALANCE OF POWER AMONG VIETNAMESE

R: "People usually discuss what Hanoi or Washington might be willing to concede, and what pressures Peking and Moscow may bring." However, "the problem lies with the two...protagonists in the war: the supporters of Saigon and...the National Liberation Front"; on the one side the Vietcong, and on the other "the South Vietnamese military establishment and a congeries of quarreling religious bodies and political factions," which are, however, "held together...by a determination not to fall under Communist rule" (p. 8).

A: On the one side there is the Party: in power in the North; in the South, presenting itself and operating largely through its front, the Front.

In the congeries on the other side the resolve to fight each other seems to surpass whatever "determination" there is to contribute to the prevention of the Party's conquest of power in the South. Vietnam is the only country in the world which remained non-Communist after 1945 solely to the extent to which the threatened or actual presence of foreign soldiers sufficed for this purpose. As Mr. Reischauer himself puts it in another context, "all along...probably the only...alternative to what has happened...was to allow Ho...to take over the whole of Vietnam" (p. 28).

TERMINATION THROUGH NEGOTIATION?

R: The bombing of the North "may so build up" the "hatred and distrust" of "the North Vietnamese" towards the United States that it "increases their determination to go on fighting," reduces their "willingness to negotiate" (p. 6).

A: The particular North Vietnamese who, under whatever influence from the people at large, make the decision to negotiate or not, are the leaders of the Party. They are apt to view it as a grievous mistake (as many other less austere politicians also do) not to entertain extreme distrust of enemies at all times, and as a sacred obligation to transform hatred of the enemy into conduct which will reduce as much as feasible losses at his hand, enhance as much as possible advance at his expense. Of course, they do not always fully succeed in disciplining emotions, but the record shows that they are as apt to be as brutal towards their own souls as against enemies.

R: One policy is to "go on fighting on somewhat the present terms, in the hope that in time we could bring about a de-escalation...and...persuade the Vietcong and Hanoi to seek a settlement...." (p. 9)

A: While it is possible to indicate conditions in which the leadership of the Party might decide to de-escalate, it is harder to imagine situations in which they would prefer explicit self-limitation to temporary reduction in activity -- unless they came to believe that the former would decisively weaken Saigon (in which case it might not be acceptable to us) or furnish a

pretext for an American withdrawal. But the acquisition of such insight by the Party's leaders is obstructed by their horror of yielding beyond present necessity, as well as by their certainty that only pressure works.

R: "I wonder if any sort of agreement will ever be reached until one side or the other recognizes that it faces eventual defeat" (p. 8).

A: Particularly then each side may prefer unadmitted (where feasible) or properly embellished withdrawal to formal renunciation, or (for us) the appearance of "peace with honor" soon to be followed by utter failure.

R: After the American elections of 1968, the Party may be "more inclined" towards a negotiated peace if it is given, in the South, a "tolerable" alternative to an "apparently endless" war (p. 18).

A: With dedication, courage and skill, the Party has been fighting for more than twenty years; there were interruptions, to be sure, but while they lasted, the Party looked towards the resumption of the struggle. Though the trend has been in its favor, there have been lengthy phases of stagnation and regression; the leaders expect them to recur, and have not ceased molding themselves and the cadres to be tenacious in stalemate and adversity.

At least until the early seventies, therefore, the Party is more apt to decide in favor of lying low in the South (as it did from the middle to the later fifties) than to reconvert itself so as to operate in an alien legality, supposing Saigon were to offer it a genuine chance of that kind.

ESCALATION

R: Attacking on the ground in the North "would probably only mean...that we would have two guerrilla wars on our hands...." (p. 10)

A: Worse. Even if we succeeded, with a much enlarged investment cost, in depleting our opponent's armed forces in both parts of the country, induced him to disperse into small units and to avoid encounters with us -- if we were as successful as the French in Algeria, 1959-1961 -- the maintenance cost of this result would probably include a protracted continuation of our massive military presence. This kind of forecast made de Gaulle, in late 1960, decide upon "disengagement" from Algeria.

WITHDRAWAL

R: The "counterstrategy" of building a "more tenable defense" (against the expansion of the zone where Communists rule in Asia) in "sounder terrain," such as Thailand, would mean "the further spread of American military power into areas where the Vietnam war had just shown that our type of military power was...ineffective" (p. 13).

A: The withdrawal would have been caused not by what Vietnam and, say, Thailand have in common -- being in Southeast Asia -- but rather by what has made a difference between them for more than three decades: the Vietnamese Party's performance -- the level of political and military energy generated by it per capita of cadres and country -- is among the highest in the world; that of the Thai Party, insignificant. On the other hand,

those opposed to the Party in Bangkok have been less feeble, and less prone to consume their forces in struggles among themselves than has been the case in Saigon.

R: Withdrawing from Vietnam would be "welching" on a commitment.

A: Yes, as to the texts of assurances given. No, with regard to a rarely stressed, but hardly hidden condition never clearly renounced by Washington: the enterprise of preventing the Party's conquest of power by arms in a country should be a genuinely common enterprise of its anti-Communists and their foreign allies. That the internal resistance against the Party might be and might remain feeble was hardly envisaged in the American mainstream until recently. That is the case of Vietnam, familiar today, but unexpected by those who initiated and enlarged American intervention between the mid-fifties and the mid-sixties. Imagine a weird world: a temporarily cohesive, impressively large, reasonably dedicated and moderately efficient Freedom Front, capital Hué; utilizing much of its human and material resources in its civil war -- and insisting on our doing the rest, urging us to destroy what must be, as did, to a noticeable extent, the occupied Europeans a quarter of a century ago -- that is the "doctrine" of "containment" applied to Vietnam. At no point has it been resolved, at any level in the United States, that we assume henceforth the obligation to endeavor, by our own force, stopping the Communist Party in a country where the balance of the will and skill to believe and persuade, to coerce and suffer, to kill and die, is decisively in its favor.

