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Vietnam Revisited

Just four nights ago I returned from my fifth trip to Vietnam in two years. Each time I go there, I come away deeply impressed with the magnificent performance and determination of our soldiers. While my impressions are still fresh, I want to share some observations on our purpose and effort in Vietnam.

In recent weeks, considerable public discussion has fostered some confusion on our policy in Vietnam. Public debate is, of course, at the heart of the American political process, and as long as such debate serves not to confuse but to isolate and define the issues at stake as a basis for informed, responsible policy making, then debate serves a constructive and very necessary purpose. As long as debate serves not to convey to other peoples the impression of a nation irresolute and deeply divided, but to reflect an open-minded public responsibly participating in the democratic process, then debate distinguishes our open society where freedom is a fact, from closed societies where freedom is merely a fiction.

The public discussions have dwelled on the three broad policy alternatives for Vietnam. One would be to escalate significantly the scope and intensity of our military effort, with the object of destroying the economic and military capability of North Vietnam.

Alternatively, we could continue with the present scope and intensity of our total effort,

gradually increasing or decreasing the scope and intensity as necessary to cope with a growth or decline in the level of conflict. This would mean more of what we are doing now – impeding the infiltration of North Vietnamese support to the Viet Cong, carrying the fight to him, disrupting and destroying his hard-core units, penetrating his strongholds and capturing the supplies which are needed to continue aggression, and reestablishing order so that South Vietnam can achieve effective government under which the people can live without fear of terrorist attack.

Finally, we could withdraw from Southeast Asia. To do so would be to abandon everything we have been fighting and dying for in Vietnam. To do so would be to close for all time the book of our American heritage. To do so would be to ignore the sacrifice and convictions of our Nation's fallen heroes such as Captain O'Sullivan who gave his life in Vietnam last fall. He wrote his family:

“Here is a country – Vietnam – with people like you and me, with families like ours, fighting for the right to determine its existence. As long as you and I believe we should be free, we must treat that feeling in others as important. So if God wills I die here, there is no finer cause today for which a man must die than the cause of these people.”

I will not further address this policy alternative because we clearly are in Vietnam to stay until aggression is ended and until the people can begin to prosper under a government of their own choice without external intimidation or interference. However, I will dwell for a moment on the other two policy alternatives. The basic difference between them lies in the answer to the

question: What is our objective in Vietnam and Southeast Asia?

Is our objective there to destroy the enemy totally, to widen the war, to pay a double price – one for destruction, one for reconstruction? Do we seek annihilation similar to that which occurred with the Romans at Cannae in 216 B.C., or the fiery, total destruction of a nation as with Carthage in 146 B.C.? Do we seek unconditional surrender as in World War II? Do we march to the belief that there is no substitute for victory and that a military short-cut must exist to the attainment of our objectives? If we do, then the policy alternative of significant escalation should be pursued.

Or is our objective to defeat, rather than to destroy, the enemy, to seek no wider war, to be concerned as well with the object beyond the war as with the means, to convince the enemy that we are reasonable yet can persevere over the long run? Do we seek a world where change can occur in an orderly, peaceful way, and when it cannot, do we believe in applying military force in a restrained, reasonable way to minimize destruction? Do we accept the fact that there are no absolutes in this world, that there are degrees of victory or winning, and that these degrees must be defined in terms of political, economic and military objectives as well as the aggregate price that must be paid to achieve them? If we do, then we recognize that the basic purpose of military power must be to maintain, restore, or to create with the minimum of destruction a climate of order so that lawful government can function effectively.

As the landpower component of our military power, the Army has a basic purpose which involves this climate of order or object beyond the war. War Department General Order 100 expressed the basic purpose in 1863:

“Modern war is not internecine war, in which the killing of the enemy is the object. The destruction of the enemy...and modern war itself...are means to obtain that object...which lies beyond the war.”

We achieve order by imposing control, and control can be imposed only by closing with an defeating the enemy. The capability to do this, without utterly destroying the hostile nation, is a unique characteristic of the Army. The Army historically has been prepared to carry out this capability, as it is doing in Vietnam. Our national objective there is to assist the Vietnamese people, their government, and their Armed Forces in their efforts to end the communist aggression, and to establish a climate of order so that the South Vietnamese government can function effectively without external interference. We also seek to revive their economy so that it can begin satisfying the people’s basic needs and aspirations for a better life.

The Army establishes control by the soldier on the ground using maneuver and fire to defeat enemy forces, and this ultimately involves hand-to-hand confrontation where individual courage, training and excellence of equipment determine the outcome. All of the Army’s five combat functions must be employed: maneuver; firepower; surveillance of the battlefield’ command and

control of all our forces in combat; and logistic support.

The war in Vietnam is one of close combat. Even though we deliver large tonnages of bombs and other destructive firepower, it is the individual soldier's lonely and hazardous task to find the enemy, fix him in position with close-in fire, and defeat him. The individual soldier, by his presence amid the Vietnamese people, brings confidence and security to them, and thus gives tangible meaning to pacification and rehabilitation projects which are part of the object beyond the war.

In Vietnam our major combat forces are located in what might be described as "enclaves". While enclaves may have several connotations, to soldiers the word means beachheads or airheads – depending upon whether the defended military positions are located on a shoreline, or around inland airfields. We have beachheads at such places as Cam Ranh Bay and Da Nang on the South China Sea coast, and airheads at such places as An Khe in the central highlands and Bien Hoa in the countryside north of Saigon. But they are not enclaves in which our troops sit defensively, waiting for the enemy to attack at the time and place of his choosing.

Rather, these are bases from which our forces, along with South Vietnamese Army and other Free World forces, can seek out and engage organized Viet Cong or the invading North Vietnamese Army. Or just as important, they are bases from which we can move to search and destroy the Viet Cong base areas.

Hidden deep in the jungles, many of these Viet Cong strongholds consist of extensive tunnel complexes, buried deep underground at multiple levels, and are strongly defended. They contain hospitals, weapons, factories, food and equipment caches, and other support facilities.

A continuous buildup of Viet Cong and North Vietnam's military forces has occurred. In 1959 the Viet Cong organized full-time local guerrilla squads. In the next two years they formed Viet Cong platoons and companies, and there was the first indication that a regiment was being organized. In 1963 and 1965, by infiltrating North Vietnamese training cadres into South Vietnam, more regiments were formed. Last year and continuing to the present, the communist forces have shown an increasing tendency to mass one or more regiments or several separate battalions under a single tactical headquarters to undertake large-scale attacks or ambushes.

This enemy buildup created the requirement for increased commitment of U.S. forces. To support these forces, last summer the Army began building a logistic base in Vietnam.

Unfortunately, the country was not blessed with modern logistic facilities, and as a consequence construction of facilities to some extent has been a pacing factor in troop deployment. Vietnam had only one port – the port of Saigon – located about 40 miles up a river. To meet the expanded need, Army Engineers quickly began developing five additional ports, the largest being Cam Ranh Bay, a great natural harbor that may one day be the size of the port of Charleston, South Carolina. On a recent visit, I stood on a pier at Cam Ranh Bay that had been fabricated in Illinois, towed down the Mississippi River, across the Atlantic through the Suez Canal and

emplaced at Cam Ranh Bay. This pier alone, capable of unloading two ocean-going ships – one on each side – doubled the port capacity of Cam Ranh Bay at that time.

When you consider that Vietnam is at the end of the a supply line extending nearly 8,000 miles from our west coast, and that it takes 19 days for a fast ship to make the trip, you can appreciate the complications I having the proper kinds of supplies and repair parts on hand when the soldier needs them. A slippage in manufacturers' delivery or oversight in quality control causes a ripple effect that will eventually be felt in Vietnam. Significant delays in production schedulers can cause enormous problems and can result in serious shortages which affect the capability of the soldier to carry out his mission. Combat material such as radios and ammunition immediately come to mind; but equally critical can be boots and clothing.

To give you an idea of the magnitude of our supply requirements, the monthly shipments to Vietnam for United States and South Vietnamese forces now approximate the same tonnage that moves monthly into the port of Boston – over 300,000 short tons of cargo.

This cargo, as with all other material received through the other ports in Vietnam, is received, stored, maintained, and distributed by troops of the 1st Logistical Command – an organization of over 25,000 men. This Command, in itself, is quite a business operation. The magnitude of its job is illustrated by such figures as these:

--The Command issues seven million rations per month. This is nearly enough

food to keep one of our Nation's largest world-wide hotel chains in dining-room operation for a year.

--The Command provides maintenance support for 17,000 vehicles of all types.

This is more than three times the size of the current Greyhound bus fleet.

--The Command handles and issues 28 million gallons of motor fuel and lubricants a month. This is enough gasoline to keep the Greyhound fleet operating for about four months.

At present, only about two percent of the cargo entering Vietnam moves by air from the United States. While this air cargo is of relatively small volume compared with the volume of seafight, the daily air cargo delivery provides urgently needed supplies and critical repair parts for such things as getting helicopters flying again or 175 mm artillery guns firing again.

The logistic problems do not end when supplies reach the ocean or air terminal in Vietnam. The very few roads and single rail line, even when not interdicted by ambush or mining, are frequently impassable due to weather or primitive construction. Therefore, we have had to use armed convoys and cargo-carrying aircraft to move supplies from the ocean and main air terminals to the troop units.

Both Army and Air Force aircraft distribute supplies in-country. There is an analogy here with a supermarket in the United States. The market receives its supplies, generally in bulks lots and

carried in large vans, from the major distribution center which in turn is fed by trains, trucks and ships. But from the supermarket to the customer, where only small and assorted amounts of supply are required, the reliance is on the customer's car, for it becomes too expensive and impractical to try to deliver retail orders by large van, which would have difficulty finding local addresses and could not get in and out of narrow side streets.

Air Force airlift is functioning in what might be called the wholesale delivery role over long distances while both Air Force and Army aircraft are carrying out the retail delivery function in support of deployed combat forces, oftentimes within small arms fire of the enemy. In recent months, the tonnage carried by Army aircraft has averaged over 30,000 short tons of passengers and cargo per month.

Under a recent agreement the Air Force will soon assume greater responsibilities for retail cargo delivery. The Army will thus be freed to devote greater attention to the rapidly increasing battlefield use of the helicopter.

Battle experience testifies to the durability of the helicopter. In over three years experience, a helicopter flying on a combat mission has been hit by ground fire once in every 400 sorties; has been knocked down by ground fire once in about 8,000 sorties; and has been lost due to ground fire only once in 16,000 sorties. We are recovering one out of every two helicopters shot down, so these helicopters can live to fight another day.

The most impressive aspect of our effort in Vietnam and in the United States remains the clear understanding and quiet dedication of our Army people to achieving the object beyond the war in Vietnam.

The Army is not a faceless, amorphous organization with no heart, no integrity, no spirit. The Army is people, our Nation's most precious asset. The Army is Captain Spruill who gave his life in Vietnam more than two years ago. Here is what he wrote home – not for publication, but in a family letter that his wife later permitted to be published, I quote:

“... we must stand strong and unafraid and give heart to an embattled and confused people. This cannot be done if America loses heart ...please don't ...talk of despair and defeat. Talk instead of steadfastness, loyalty and of victory – for we must and we can win here. There is no backing out of Vietnam, for it will follow us everywhere we go. We have drawn the line here and the America we all know and love best is not one to back away.”

The Army is families of our fighting men. Under difficult circumstances, they show a steadfastness and a courage that parallel in every respect, the valor displayed on the battlefields. From the wife of a sergeant who was killed several days after Christmas, came this:

“My husband after 19-1/2 years of dedication to Army life was proud to be a part in this objective and told me before he left how thankful he was that he could still protect us on foreign soil rather than have us endangered here at home and suffer the ravages of communism.”

“He was as devoted to his nation’s cause as he was to us as a husband and father.”

In the words of Thomas Paine, “These are the times that try men’s souls”. But we need not be dismayed by the obstacles, nor fearful of the challenges ahead, nor apprehensive about our strength, nor puzzled about our determination, nor doubtful about our responsibilities. In the words of Captain Spruill – not in the application to Vietnam as he used them, but in the context of contemporary society – “we must stand strong and unafraid and give heart to an embattled people.” As a Nation and as individuals we can do no less.