

# 1 Vietnam: Study in Ironies

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6 **We have cried** to the world that we seek only "an honorable peace" in Vietnam,  
7 but it becomes more and more apparent that a peace which accords with our  
8 concept of honor is a peace which can be imposed only on a defeated enemy.  
9 General Westmoreland's purpose in coming to address both houses of Congress  
10 and to talk with the President was to appeal for even more troops, in order, as  
11 Rep. Mendel Rivers (D, S.G.), the chairman of the House Armed Services  
12 Committee, affirmed, "to bring the armies of North Vietnam to their knees."

13 The contradiction between our ideal aims of a peace of conciliation and such an  
14 imposed peace, which only a defeated enemy would accept, can be understood  
15 only in the light of an ironic self-deception--ironic because we are the victims of  
16 our own ideology. We are a democratic nation whose power has grown to  
17 imperial proportions. We have made the mistake of being drawn into a civil war  
18 in an obscure nation of Southeast Asia, a mistake that has imperiled our imperial  
19 prestige. But in a democracy, particularly one with nostalgic visions of an early  
20 innocence, it is necessary to veil imperial and strategic interests behind  
21 "democratic" and ideal goals. Hence, this war is interpreted as an ideological  
22 struggle between the "free" world and the forces of communism. That means we  
23 must carve out of a nation which was united in its struggle against French  
24 imperialism, a new nation out of the southern sliver of a nation, the partition of  
25 which was ordained in the 1954 Geneva conference. Ho Chi Minh, regarded by  
26 the peasants of Vietnam as the George Washington of his nation, submitted to the  
27 partition because he hoped that the plebiscite promised in two years would result

28 in the unity of the nation. But Ho Chi Minh is both a national patriot and a  
29 communist.

30 The communist ideology makes room for this double vocation in its concept of a  
31 "war of national liberation." Our ideology, on the other hand, defines him simply  
32 as a communist. We are rather unclear, since the Sino-Russian division, whether  
33 he is a tool of China or Russia. The more ignorant of our patriots make him a tool  
34 of China. Our former ambassador, Mr. Lodge, for instance, implied that he was a  
35 Chinese tool, though Vietnamese patriots have always regarded China with  
36 hatred and fear. More recently, when Chinese anarchy gave Russia the advantage  
37 in Asia, Russian sponsorship of the Vietnam "war of liberation" has become more  
38 obvious. Our airplanes have become increasingly the victims of Russian missiles,  
39 and the Russians have warned us that our escalation would prompt them to  
40 increase their aid to North Vietnam. So the war has become a contest between  
41 two nuclear imperial powers, who are, or have been, ironically, the tacit partners  
42 to prevent a nuclear catastrophe.

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44 **This irony is** made more vivid if we remember that these two super-nations,  
45 both with power of imperial proportions dwarfing that of the 19th-century  
46 empires of European nations, are ideologically, that is, by definition, anti-  
47 imperialist. The USSR considers itself anti-imperialist because its dogma affirms  
48 that imperialism is the final fruit of capitalism; as it has abolished private  
49 property, it is therefore, by definition, innocent.

50 The US, on the other hand, believes itself anti-imperialist because its mass  
51 production in a hemispheric economy has made foreign markets unnecessary.  
52 We have forgotten our early expansive mood of "Manifest Destiny" and our brief  
53 period of overt imperialism after the Spanish-American War, when the Spanish  
54 possessions of Puerto Rico, Cuba, and Hawaii were thrown inadvertently into our  
55 lap. There was also the ideology, running from Jefferson to Wilson, which defined  
56 democracy as innocent of imperial moods and methods, much in the same way as  
57 communist ideology simply regarded its anti-capitalism as proof of its innocence  
58 of imperialism.

59 This problem of communist and democratic ideology is made more confusing by  
60 the claims of both camps that each is free, not only of the imperialist taint, but  
61 also free of any ideological taint in its view of the world. The US regards itself as  
62 innocent of ideology because a democracy presumably has the freedom to  
63 challenge all class ideologies in the free market of ideas. But we fail to recognize  
64 that this freedom does not include the capacity to refute our own pretensions in  
65 international relations.

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67 **In a national** community, means of communication gradually erode the  
68 ideologies of subnational classes and ethnic groups. The sovereignty of the  
69 government is derived from the authority of the community itself. In Western  
70 Europe the unity of the community was achieved by the pre-democratic triumph  
71 of the national community over the divisive tendencies of dialects and tribal  
72 loyalties. It proved strong enough to manipulate equilibria of power in the  
73 interest of justice. Free societies finally allowed the class of industrial workers to  
74 organize and to bargain collectively--thus refuting the Marxist indictment that  
75 free governments merely were the stooges of the bourgeois class. This notable  
76 triumph of a democratic sovereign power made the Marxist dogma irrelevant in  
77 the whole of Western Europe.

78 But, while it is generally acknowledged in our western world that a free society is  
79 preferable to all forms of dictatorship, whether of the right or left, it is certainly  
80 ideological for us to regard a free democratic government as a simple historical  
81 possibility for all nations in all continents and in every stage of cultural and  
82 economic development. It is in this context that we must understand why and  
83 how we were drawn into the Vietnam "quagmire," on the basis of our imperial  
84 prestige and with our dubious use of this democratic ideology.

85 The French were expelled from their empire in Indochina by a communist-  
86 inspired "National Liberation" movement, a classical scheme of communist anti-  
87 imperialism. It inspired national patriotism in the three little nations of  
88 Indochina among the royal princes of Laos and Cambodia, as well as in the  
89 patriotic heart of Ho Chi Minh of Vietnam, that wily old communist who had  
90 been trained in Moscow. Communist ideology could differentiate between the  
91 communist and nationalist strands of motivation; but to us they all were simply  
92 communists.

93 These nationalists knew very well that we had supported the French financially,  
94 even though Eisenhower refused to give them logistic support in their last stand  
95 at Dien Bien Phu. The French premier, Mendes-France, capitulated at the Geneva  
96 conference in 1954. Cambodia and Laos were neutralized, but Vietnam  
97 provisionally was partitioned because it contained a resolute Mandarin class of  
98 landlords, incidentally Catholic in religion, and strongly anti-communist.  
99 Cardinal Spellman offered to finance the initial costs of moving Catholic families  
100 of the north to the south. As we know, many of the members of the military junta  
101 which rules South Vietnam today are northerners, as of course is Marshal Ky  
102 himself.

103 Ho Chi Minh reluctantly accepted the partition because he thought that the  
104 promised national plebiscite finally would unify the nation. But he did not count

105 on American power and the provisional efficacy of our democratic ideology. We  
106 supported the regime of the Mandarin Ngo family with one brother. Diem, as  
107 president, and another brother, Nhu, as the chief organizer of its repression of  
108 Buddhist monks and peasants. Diem was hailed in the United States as "the  
109 Churchill of Asia." The Diem regime refused, with our connivance, to allow the  
110 plebiscite. It could not count on a majority. There were too many Buddhist monks  
111 and peasants in the south, not to speak of the communist nationalists, the Viet  
112 Cong. Following the end of the Diem regime in a bloody rebellion, the south has  
113 been ruled by various army juntas. Thus our facade of democracy has become  
114 very incredible, though the current junta head. Marshal Ky, dutifully brought  
115 with him to Guam the text of a new constitution and the implied promise of a  
116 future democratic election. Promised land reform has never been carried out. In  
117 short, we have a perfect caricature of democracy, which corresponds to the  
118 caricature of communist propaganda.

119 Eisenhower promised only financial aid to Saigon. Kennedy increased financial  
120 aid and American military advisers. It remained for President Johnson to escalate  
121 the war to horrible proportions, at the cost of thousands of American casualties  
122 and billions of dollars. All this is done in the name of "democracy," of "the  
123 principle of self-determination" and of "resisting aggression." The President  
124 assures us that, "we will not desert our friends or our principles." And Mr. Rusk  
125 tirelessly reiterates that we are only teaching people "to leave their neighbors  
126 alone." In short, this war has become monstrous in the cost of lives, in the effect  
127 on our "Great Society" program of rescuing urban centers of air and water  
128 pollution, and of validating our civil rights movement by offering our  
129 unemployed and technically uneducated Negro youth education which will  
130 render them employable in a technical economy.

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132 **The master politician** in the White House has achieved a final irony in our  
133 "democratic" foreign policy. He has ordered a massive bombing of North Vietnam  
134 in order to force the adversary into an "honorable peace." In domestic terms this  
135 means, not an increase of our moral prestige in the world, but a peace which  
136 insures the mourning relatives of our dead soldiers that they have not died in  
137 vain. Any peace which carves out our domain in Vietnam, whether or not of  
138 democratic nature, will do--at least until the next election. Yet this massive  
139 bombing not only intensifies the odium in which we are held by the rest of the  
140 world, but also increases the danger of confrontation with either China or Russia.

141 A final ironic touch is given by the fact that only our plutocratic wealth allows us  
142 to commit these stupidities in international relations. If only we were a little  
143 poorer, we would have been prevented from committing these mistakes which

144 cost billions in money. The lives of American soldiers are not to be computed in  
145 economic terms, and we might have spent the blood in a more straited economic  
146 circumstance. Perhaps the cost in lives must be attributed, not to our wealth, but  
147 to our self-righteousness.  
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