

McNamara's Conscience Meets Hanoi

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During four lively days in late June 1997, thirteen Vietnamese and thirteen American scholars and former decision-makers sat down in Hanoi to scrutinize the missed opportunities of the 1960s. The American team wanted to find out if, when and how the Vietnam War could have been avoided or terminated, and why the opportunity to do so had been missed. Both teams tried to remember their own and understand each others' mindsets from thirty years ago. Some of the most interesting debates concerned the failures to initiate peace talks until they finally began in Paris, May 1968.

A motivating factor behind the initiative to organize the conference was the conviction of former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, and also of other members of the US team, that millions of lives could have been spared if the Johnson administration had understood what it was up against in Vietnam, and if the Vietnamese leaders had shown a better understanding of US politics, policies and intentions.

The conference was certainly a step forward on the way to better US-Vietnamese relations, but the step was not as big as some would have hoped. Much of the conference became a war of words, and the two delegations did not get into frank and open discussions, at least not during the open proceedings. The US side had produced massive documentation, based on research done in US, other Western, Soviet and Chinese archives, but little new historical evidence came forward from the Vietnamese side. And McNamara did not obtain what I believe was his foremost personal aim to find someone on the Vietnamese side who was willing to assume moral responsibility and share his bad conscience for the tragedy of the Vietnam War.

Host, Funders and Purposes

The conference was hosted by the research branch of the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry, the Institute of International Relations (IIR). Under the leadership of its Director, Ambassador Dao Huy Ngoc, it had put together a highly qualified and representative Vietnamese team of veterans and scholars, both military and civilian.

Former officials included: Former Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach, former Deputy Foreign Minister Dinh Nho Lien, former First Deputy Foreign Minister Tran Quang Co, former Director of the European Division in the Foreign Ministry Nguyen Dinh Phuong, and former delegate to the Geneva conferences on Vietnam (1954) and Laos (1962) Luu Van Loi, and General Dang Vu Hiep. *Scholars included:* Ambassador Dao Huy Ngoc, Senior Researcher Luu Doan Huynh, Ambassador Nguyen Khac Huynh, General Nguyen Dinh Uoc, General Doan Chuong, Colonel Quach Hai Luong, and Advisor at the Vietnam News Agency Tran Ngoc Kha.

On the American side, the organizing institution was the Watson Institute for International Studies of Brown University, and financial support had been obtained from The Rockefeller Foundation, Rockefeller Family and Associates, Office of the President of Vassar College, The National Security Archive at George Washington University, and The Cold War International

History Project of the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, DC. The US team also consisted partly of former officials, partly of historians and political scientists.

Former US officials included: Former Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, former Deputy Special Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs Francis M. Bator, former CIA analyst for Southeast Asia and deputy to special negotiator Averell Harriman Chester L. Cooper, former Attorney General and former Deputy Secretary of State Nicholas Katzenbach, former Special Assistant to Chairman of the JCS Maxwell Taylor General William Y. Smith, and former staff member at the National Security Council and Office of the Secretary of Defense Lt. Gen. Dale Vesser, who served in Vietnam in two periods during the 1960s, in 1967-68 as field commander of infantry. *Scholars included:* Thomas J. Biersteker, Director, Watson Institute (Brown University), James G. Blight (Brown), Robert K. Brigham (Vassar), George C. Herring (Kentucky), James G. Hershberg (George Washington), Charles E. Neu (Brown) and John Prados (independent scholar and author). In addition, a number of observers (like myself) were present.

The conference participants probably arrived with purposes of three basic kinds: political, scholarly and moral. The political purpose was to contribute to improving the US-Vietnamese relationship. The scholarly purpose was to get more facts on the table about Vietnamese decision-making during the Vietnam War. The moral purpose was to explore the responsibilities for the war as a human tragedy.

Politically Brave

The political purpose was probably better fulfilled than the two others. The conference took place immediately before Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's visit to Vietnam, and provided the new US ambassador Pete Peterson with an opportunity to build up to her visit through a series of well publicized diplomatic events. McNamara was media conscious indeed and made several televised statements not only about the 1960s but also about the need for Vietnam to scrap remaining parts of the centrally planned economy and adapt itself fully to the international market to achieve high levels of economic growth.

It caused frustration, however, in the American team that their Vietnamese hosts, on the last day before the conference started, suddenly let it be known that no media coverage would be allowed of the conference as such. The Vietnamese delegation remained excessively careful to avoid any break with the party line even after the conference had been closed to the press.

An hour long encounter was organized between McNamara and former Defense Minister General Vo Nguyen Giap just after the conference. Giap did not, it seemed, want to talk with McNamara. He turned the meeting into a monologue. This gave him a chance to express his desire, explicitly based on Vietnam's geopolitical position and cultural importance, to see improvement in the US-Vietnamese relationship.

Politically I think one should see the fact that the conference was organized at all as an indication of the priority that many influential party leaders, with full backing from the Vietnamese foreign ministry, presently accord to improving relations with the United States. The conference started the same day as the VCP Central Committee ended its last plenum before the national elections of July, a plenum where the decision was made to not let any of the top three party leaders stand as candidates in the elections.

Scholarly Disappointment

Two of the institutions sponsoring the conference on the American side were the National Security Archive at George Washington University and the Cold War International History Project at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington. For some years now the latter has been able to publish in its Bulletin an impressive mass of new evidence on the Cold War from the archives of formerly communist countries. We have learnt a lot about such events as the Cuban missile crisis and the Korean War, and also, through the work of scholars such as Ilya Gaiduk, Chen Jian, Zhang Shuguang, and Qiang Zhai, about Soviet and Chinese policies towards Vietnam. These sources, not least the Chinese ones, give a fascinating glimpse into top level communist decision-making during the Vietnam War.

For the Vietnamese, most notably their historians, it must be a problem that their party leaders stick to a policy of secrecy as far as contemporary history is concerned. No new evidence has been provided concerning internal debates within the Vietnamese Communist Party, not even within the international communist movement. For many years there has been an overwhelming American bias in scholarly literature about the Vietnam War, simply because so much evidence has been released from US archives. Scholars wanting to emphasize the other side of the story, and trying to look at the war from the perspective of Vietnam, have had little new evidence to build upon.

Now a new bias is developing. Over the next years we are going to get massive new evidence about the communist side of the Vietnam War from East European, Soviet and Chinese sources. The main effect of Vietnam's excessive secrecy, which precludes the development of independent Vietnamese historical scholarship, will then be to once again give its national history away to foreign domination. Foreign scholars are going to preserve their hegemony within the field of contemporary Vietnamese history, and they shall continue to rely on informed guesses based on foreign sources when trying to assess what went on inside the Vietnamese Communist Party. Memoirs of party dissident, though, are now also becoming a significant source.

There was some hope before the June event that new evidence would be put on the table. Robert Brigham had done tremendous work to establish evidence from the US side, and he is one of the very few US scholars who has made strenuous efforts to get access to Vietnamese sources. Thus he has built friendships with a great number of Vietnamese historians and decision-makers. The hopes were frustrated, at least for the time being. The closest one got to new evidence was when some of the Vietnamese participants referred orally to documents they had been reading in preparation for the conference, but which have also been printed in Vietnamese journals.

This provided for an interesting statement by Ambassador Nguyen Khac Huynh summarizing the three steps (April, July, November 1967) of Hanoi's decision to launch the Tet offensive of 1968, and relating Hanoi's three scenarios for the outcome: "big victory", "moderate victory" and "limited success". Defeat, as we see, was not an option. The result was later considered to

have been a little better than "moderate victory". Huynh also acknowledged that the offensives after Tet (May and August 1968) were not as effective as expected, and brought heavy casualties.

There were a few other Vietnamese statements which were similarly interesting, primarily some of the ones which were based on personal memory, but such statements were rare indeed.

One more general lesson can also be drawn from some of the exchanges. If the leaders of a country at war want to find a way out of the war, they must not overestimate the degree of coordination between central and local or military and civilian institutions on the other side. From statements made by Chester Cooper, it was clear that meteorological rather than diplomatic factors decided the timing of US bombing raids against North Vietnam. Similarly, on the Vietnamese side the local military commanders had a very high degree of latitude for making independent decisions to launch attacks. Thus it seems, from what the Vietnamese participants stated, that both the fatal 2 August attack against Maddox in the Tonkin Gulf and the attack against Pleiku on 8 February 1965 were launched on local initiative, under general orders obtained a long time in advance.

Thus there was something new to be learned. Perhaps it was naive to expect more. The conference may well have served as a useful "de-mining operation", removing some distrust and misunderstandings, and paving the way for more serious scholarly workshops in the future (if further funding can be raised). At any rate, the Vietnamese are likely to let verbal or edited revelations precede the release of archival source material. Continued dialogue will therefore be essential.

Morally a Dead End

The Vietnam War was once called "McNamara's War". McNamara himself, and also such other former US decision-makers as Nick Katzenbach and Chester Cooper, had come to Hanoi partly to find out more about their own mistakes in the 1960s, and partly to excuse themselves for having had so little understanding of Vietnam and of Asia in general. But they also came in the vain hope of finding someone on the Vietnamese side who would be willing to display a similar kind of regret and openness. During the conference the US participants often entreated their Vietnamese discussion partners to acknowledge that if the United States had made mistakes and had not understood Vietnam, the Vietnamese leaders had also made errors and failed to understand the United States.

They received, as might have been expected, a cold shoulder. The Vietnam War was after all fought on Vietnamese territory, not in the United States. It is fundamental to the national ethos of the Vietnamese Communist Party that American military forces had no justification for being in Vietnam in the first place. Leaders of a liberation struggle do not share responsibility or sense of guilt with their invaders. When McNamara entreated Vietnam's former long time negotiator and later foreign minister Nguyen Co Thach to admit that Hanoi had made mistakes in assessing the intentions of the United States, Thach answered:

"Yes, we misjudged your intentions, but that was in an earlier

period. In 1945 and a few years after that, we had illusions about US anticolonialism. We thought you might support us against French colonialism, or at least remain neutral. We were mistaken, but we learned from our mistakes. By 1950 we no longer had any illusions, and after that made no further errors in our assessments of US intentions."

There is no way that any former member of the Johnson Administration, no matter how much sense of guilt he displays, can get any Vietnamese decision-maker to share this sense of guilt. The Vietnamese leaders are quite willing to forgive. This is a matter of course, but not to share responsibility for the war as tragedy. Despite the enormous suffering of the Vietnamese people during the war, the Vietnamese Communist Party continues to see the war primarily as a victory, not a tragedy. As General Vo Nguyen Giap stated during his post-conference monologue with McNamara, it was a victory not only for the Vietnamese people who dispelled the myth that great powers can dominate small countries at their will, but for all those peace-loving forces in the world who fought against the war, including the anti-war movement in the United States. Giap and his fellow comrades remain proud of their victory. They will not and cannot share McNamara's guilt.

Are Such Conferences Useful?

Despite all of my skeptical comments above, I consider the conference to have been a success. It was a considerable achievement, both for the Vietnamese hosts and the American organizers, to be able to hold it at all. There were many memorable exchanges of views. The conference served a function in the ongoing attempt to improve Vietnamese-American ties. It also was quite useful as a learning process.

In the future, Americans may be less likely to seek moral burden-sharing. On the other hand it may be necessary to strengthen our ongoing effort to make the Vietnamese understand that they can only make a convincing scholarly impression at historical conferences if they provide new evidence and allow their own scholars to develop independent analyses based on such new evidence.

It may be a good idea to move the focus back to 1945 (*see ajoining column*), the year when the Vietnamese admit to have misunderstood the United States. The endeavor could then be followed up next year with a conference on the intermediate years 1945-60, then also with some scholarly participation from the French side. From Hanoi's perspective, the American and French wars were one long war of liberation from foreign domination. But the Vietnamese have noticed, as one Vietnamese participant confided in me during a break in the conference, one basic difference between their two Western enemies: The French have never expressed any regrets.

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OSS and Viet Minh Veterans Meet for Second Time in New York

In October of 1995, seven Office of Strategic Services (OSS) veterans traveled to Hanoi to meet with the Vietnamese led by Ho Chi Minh they worked with in 1945 to oppose Japanese occupation forces. The OSS provided the first foreign assistance to the Viet Minh in the form of weapons and training; witnessed in Ha Noi the proclamation of independence from France; and assisted in the formation of the Vietnamese American Friendship Association. Later, ignoring advice from the OSS men that Ho led an authentic nationalist movement, the Truman Administration supported the re-establishment of French colonialism.

A roundtable was held in Hanoi to talk of their work together, and lengthy transcripts came out of those two days of meetings. This second round, which will include both western and Vietnamese historians, will be a more structured look at these events in the hopes that a book about this early cooperation will be the outcome. From the "discovering" of Ho Chi Minh and receiving his help with weather reports, to the march down to Hanoi that the OSS made with General Vo Nguyen Giap, to the killing of the first American in Vietnam, Colonel Dewey, to the founding of the first friendship organization between the two countries, these men have been witness to a little known, but vitally important piece of U.S. - Vietnam history.

On September 24th, a public meeting will be held at the Asia Society in New York City to report on what the three days of discussions have revealed. Vietnamese Deputy Foreign Minister Vu Khoan, and former U.S. Charge d'Affairs to the SRV Desaix Anderson, will speak on what impact the 1945 events have on present U.S. - Vietnam relations. An open press conference will be held, and two showings of the A&E documentary on the OSS and Viet Minh will also take place. The first showing of the documentary is at 3 pm, followed by the Press Conference at 4 pm, a reception at 5 pm, the public presentation at 6 pm, and the film again at 8 pm.

This program has been made possible by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

The Asia Society, 725 Park Avenue, New York, New York 10021 Tel. (212) 288-6400

The fee for Asia Society members is \$20, for non-members \$25.



OSS veterans Henry Prunier, Al Thomas, and Mac Shin with Vu Xuan Hong of the Vietnam-USA Society, visit Tan Trao.