# A Time to Break Silen

来源：网络 作者：紫芸轻舞 更新时间：2024-09-27

*they must see americans as strange liberators. the vietnamese people proclaimed their own independence \*in 1954\* -- in 1...*

they must see americans as strange liberators. the vietnamese people proclaimed their own independence \*in 1954\* -- in 1945 \*rather\* -- after a combined french and japanese occupation and before the communist revolution in china. they were led by ho chi minh. even though they quoted the american declaration of independence in their own document of freedom, we refused to recognize them. instead, we decided to support france in its reconquest of her former colony. our government felt then that the vietnamese people were not ready for independence, and we again fell victim to the deadly western arrogance that has poisoned the international atmosphere for so long. with that tragic decision we rejected a revolutionary government seeking self-determination and a government that had been established not by china -- for whom the vietnamese have no great love -- but by clearly indigenous forces that included some communists. for the peasants this new government meant real land reform, one of the most important needs in their lives.

for nine years following 1945 we denied the people of vietnam the right of independence. for nine years we vigorously supported the french in their abortive effort to recolonize vietnam. before the end of the war we were meeting eighty percent of the french war costs. even before the french were defeated at dien bien phu, they began to despair of their reckless action, but we did not. we encouraged them with our huge financial and military supplies to continue the war even after they had lost the will. soon we would be paying almost the full costs of this tragic attempt at recolonization.

after the french were defeated, it looked as if independence and land reform would come again through the geneva agreement. but instead there came the united states, determined that ho should not unify the temporarily spanided nation, and the peasants watched again as we supported one of the most vicious modern dictators, our chosen man, premier diem. the peasants watched and cringed as diem ruthlessly rooted out all opposition, supported their extortionist landlords, and refused even to discuss reunification with the north. the peasants watched as all this was presided over by united states\' influence and then by increasing numbers of united states troops who came to help quell the insurgency that diem\'s methods had aroused. when diem was overthrown they may have been happy, but the long line of military dictators seemed to offer no real change, especially in terms of their need for land and peace.

the only change came from america, as we increased our troop commitments in support of governments which were singularly corrupt, inept, and without popular support. all the while the people read our leaflets and received the regular promises of peace and democracy and land reform. now they languish under our bombs and consider us, not their fellow vietnamese, the real enemy. they move sadly and apathetically as we herd them off the land of their fathers into concentration camps where minimal social needs are rarely met. they know they must move on or be destroyed by our bombs.

so they go, primarily women and children and the aged. they watch as we poison their water, as we kill a million acres of their crops. they must weep as the bulldozers roar through their areas preparing to destroy the precious trees. they wander into the hospitals with at least twenty casualties from american firepower for one vietcong-inflicted injury. so far we may have killed a million of them, mostly children. they wander into the towns and see thousands of the children, homeless, without clothes, running in packs on the streets like animals. they see the children degraded by our soldiers as they beg for food. they see the children selling their sisters to our soldiers, soliciting for their mothers.

what do the peasants think as we ally ourselves with the landlords and as we refuse to put any action into our many words concerning land reform? what do they think as we test out our latest weapons on them, just as the germans tested out new medicine and new tortures in the concentration camps of europe? where are the roots of the independent vietnam we claim to be building? is it among these voiceless ones?

we have destroyed their two most cherished institutions: the family and the village. we have destroyed their land and their crops. we have cooperated in the crushing of the nation\'s only noncommunist revolutionary political force, the unified buddhist church. we have supported the enemies of the peasants of saigon. we have corrupted their women and children and killed their men.

now there is little left to build on, save bitterness. \*soon the only solid physical foundations remaining will be found at our military bases and in the concrete of the concentration camps we call \"fortified hamlets.\" the peasants may well wonder if we plan to build our new vietnam on such grounds as these. could we blame them for such thoughts? we must speak for them and raise the questions they cannot raise. these, too, are our brothers.

perhaps a more difficult but no less necessary task is to speak for those who have been designated as our enemies.\* what of the national liberation front, that strangely anonymous group we call \"vc\" or \"communists\"? what must they think of the united states of america when they realize that we permitted the repression and cruelty of diem, which helped to bring them into being as a resistance group in the south? what do they think of our condoning the violence which led to their own taking up of arms? how can they believe in our integrity when now we speak of \"aggression from the north\" as if there were nothing more essential to the war? how can they trust us when now we charge them with violence after the murderous reign of diem and charge them with violence while we pour every new weapon of death into their land? surely we must understand their feelings, even if we do not condone their actions. surely we must see that the men we supported pressed them to their violence. surely we must see that our own computerized plans of destruction simply dwarf their greatest acts.

how do they judge us when our officials know that their membership is less than twenty-five percent communist, and yet insist on giving them the blanket name? what must they be thinking when they know that we are aware of their control of major sections of vietnam, and yet we appear ready to allow national elections in which this highly organized political parallel government will not have a part? they ask how we can speak of free elections when the saigon press is censored and controlled by the military junta. and they are surely right to wonder what kind of new government we plan to help form without them, the only party in real touch with the peasants. they question our political goals and they deny the reality of a peace settlement from which they will be excluded. their questions are frighteningly relevant. is our nation planning to build on political myth again, and then shore it up upon the power of new violence?

here is the true meaning and value of compassion and nonviolence, when it helps us to see the enemy\'s point of view, to hear his questions, to know his assessment of ourselves. for from his view we may indeed see the basic weaknesses of our own condition, and if we are mature, we may learn and grow and profit from the wisdom of the brothers who are called the opposition.

so, too, with hanoi. in the north, where our bombs now pummel the land, and our mines endanger the waterways, we are met by a deep but understandable mistrust. to speak for them is to explain this lack of confidence in western words, and especially their distrust of american intentions now. in hanoi are the men who led the nation to independence against the japanese and the french, the men who sought membership in the french commonwealth and were betrayed by the weakness of paris and the willfulness of the colonial armies. it was they who led a second struggle against french domination at tremendous costs, and then were persuaded to give up the land they controlled between the thirteenth and seventeenth parallel as a temporary measure at geneva. after 1954 they watched us conspire with diem to prevent elections which could have surely brought ho chi minh to power over a united vietnam, and they realized they had been betrayed again. when we ask why they do not leap to negotiate, these things must be remembered.

also, it must be clear that the leaders of hanoi considered the presence of american troops in support of the diem regime to have been the initial military breach of the geneva agreement concerning foreign troops. they remind us that they did not begin to send troops in large numbers and even supplies into the south until american forces had moved into the tens of thousands.

hanoi remembers how our leaders refused to tell us the truth about the earlier north vietnamese overtures for peace, how the president claimed that none existed when they had clearly been made. ho chi minh has watched as america has spoken of peace and built up its forces, and now he has surely heard the increasing international rumors of american plans for an invasion of the north. he knows the bombing and shelling and mining we are doing are part of traditional pre-invasion strategy. perhaps only his sense of humor and of irony can save him when he hears the most powerful nation of the world speaking of aggression as it drops thousands of bombs on a poor, weak nation more than \*eight hundred, or rather,\* eight thousand miles away from its shores.

at this point i should make it clear that while i have tried in these last few minutes to give a voice to the voiceless in vietnam and to understand the arguments of those who are called \"enemy,\" i am as deeply concerned about our own troops there as anything else. for it occurs to me that what we are submitting them to in vietnam is not simply the brutalizing process that goes on in any war where armies face each other and seek to destroy. we are adding cynicism to the process of death, for they must know after a short period there that none of the things we claim to be fighting for are really involved. before long they must know that their government has sent them into a struggle among vietnamese, and the more sophisticated surely realize that we are on the side of the wealthy, and the secure, while we create a hell for the poor.

somehow this madness must cease. we must stop now. i speak as a child of god and brother to the suffering poor of vietnam. i speak for those whose land is being laid waste, whose homes are being destroyed, whose culture is being subverted. i speak for the poor of america who are paying the double price of smashed hopes at home, and death and corruption in vietnam. i speak as a citizen of the world, for the world as it stands aghast at the path we have taken. i speak as one who loves america, to the leaders of our own nation: the great initiative in this war is ours; the initiative to stop it must be ours.

this is the message of the great buddhist leaders of vietnam. recently one of them wrote these words, and i quote:

each day the war goes on the hatred increases in the heart of the vietnamese and in the hearts of those of humanitarian instinct. the americans are forcing even their friends into becoming their enemies. it is curious that the americans, who calculate so carefully on the possibilities of military victory, do not realize that in the process they are incurring deep psychological and political defeat. the image of america will never again be the image of revolution, freedom, and democracy, but the image of violence and militarism (unquote).

if we continue, there will be no doubt in my mind and in the mind of the world that we have no honorable intentions in vietnam. if we do not stop our war against the people of vietnam immediately, the world will be left with no other alternative than to see this as some horrible, clumsy, and deadly game we have decided to play. the world now demands a maturity of america that we may not be able to achieve. it demands that we admit that we have been wrong from the beginning of our adventure in vietnam, that we have been detrimental to the life of the vietnamese people. the situation is one in which we must be ready to turn sharply from our present ways. in order to atone for our sins and errors in vietnam, we should take the initiative in bringing a halt to this tragic war.

\*i would like to suggest five concrete things that our government should do immediately to begin the long and difficult process of extricating ourselves from this nightmarish conflict:

number one: end all bombing in north and south vietnam.

number two: declare a unilateral cease-fire in the hope that such action will create the atmosphere for negotiation.

three: take immediate steps to prevent other battlegrounds in southeast asia by curtailing our military buildup in thailand and our interference in laos.

four: realistically accept the fact that the national liberation front has substantial support in south vietnam and must thereby play a role in any meaningful negotiations and any future vietnam government.

five: \*set a date that we will remove all foreign troops from vietnam in accordance with the 1954 geneva agreement.

part of our ongoing...part of our ongoing commitment might well express itself in an offer to grant asylum to any vietnamese who fears for his life under a new regime which included the liberation front. then we must make what reparations we can for the damage we have done. we must provide the medical aid that is badly needed, making it available in this country, if necessary. meanwhile... meanwhile, we in the churches and synagogues have a continuing task while we urge our government to disengage itself from a disgraceful commitment. we must continue to raise our voices and our lives if our nation persists in its perverse ways in vietnam. we must be prepared to match actions with words by seeking out every creative method of protest possible.

\*as we counsel young men concerning military service, we must clarify for them our nation\'s role in vietnam and challenge them with the alternative of conscientious objection. i am pleased to say that this is a path now chosen by more than seventy students at my own alma mater, morehouse college, and i recommend it to all who find the american course in vietnam a dishonorable and unjust one. moreover, i would encourage all ministers of draft age to give up their ministerial exemptions and seek status as conscientious objectors.\* these are the times for real choices and not false ones. we are at the moment when our lives must be placed on the line if our nation is to survive its own folly. every man of humane convictions must decide on the protest that best suits his convictions, but we must all protest.

now there is something seductively tempting about stopping there and sending us all off on what in some circles has become a popular crusade against the war in vietnam. i say we must enter that struggle, but i wish to go on now to say something even more disturbing.

the war in vietnam is but a symptom of a far deeper malady within the american spirit, and if we ignore this sobering reality...and if we ignore this sobering reality, we will find ourselves organizing \"clergy and laymen concerned\" committees for the next generation. they will be concerned about guatemala and peru. they will be concerned about thailand and cambodia. they will be concerned about mozambique and south africa. we will be marching for these and a dozen other names and attending rallies without end, unless there is a significant and profound change in american life and policy.

and so, such thoughts take us beyond vietnam, but not beyond our calling as sons of the living god.

in 1957, a sensitive american official overseas said that it seemed to him that our nation was on the wrong side of a world revolution. during the past ten years, we have seen emerge a pattern of suppression which has now justified the presence of u.s. military advisors in venezuela. this need to maintain social stability for our investments accounts for the counterrevolutionary action of american forces in guatemala. it tells why american helicopters are being used against guerrillas in cambodia and why american napalm and green beret forces have already been active against rebels in peru.

it is with such activity in mind that the words of the late john f. kennedy come back to haunt us. five years ago he said, \"those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.\" increasingly, by choice or by accident, this is the role our nation has taken, the role of those who make peaceful revolution impossible by refusing to give up the privileges and the pleasures that come from the immense profits of overseas investments. i am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must undergo a radical revolution of values. we must rapidly begin...we must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. when machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.

a true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. on the one hand, we are called to play the good samaritan on life\'s roadside, but that will be only an initial act. one day we must come to see that the whole jericho road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life\'s highway. true compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. it comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.

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