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Cold War Operations: The Politics of Communist Confrontation, Part VI: Vietnam

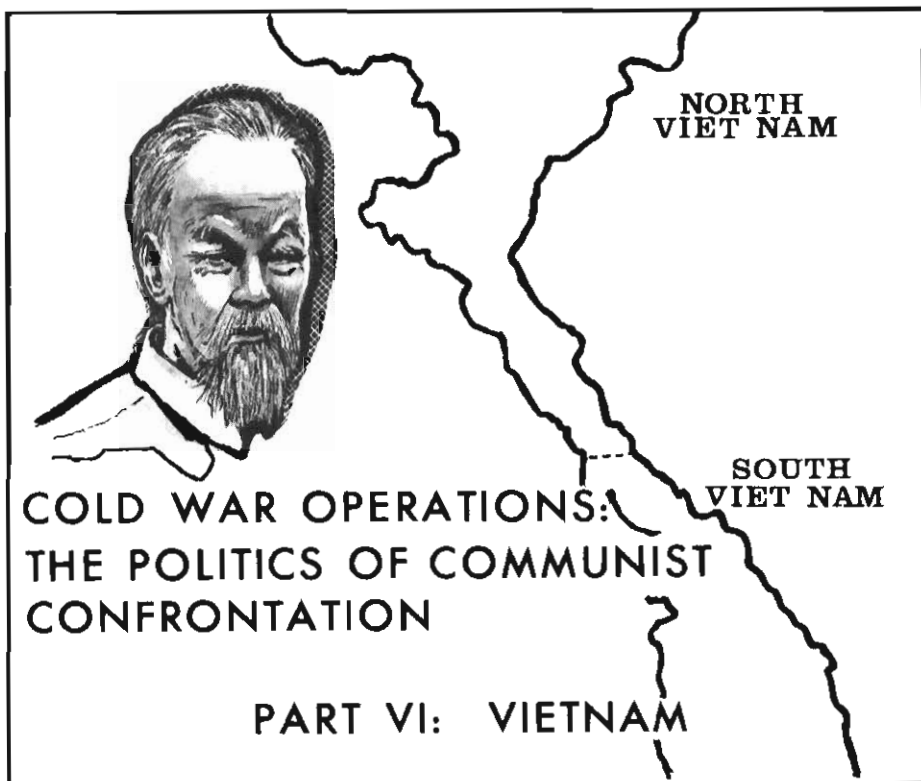
Lyman B. Kirkpatrick

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Professor Lyman B. Kirkpatrick

(A series of eight lectures by Professor Lyman B. Kirkpatrick of the Political Science Department, Brown University, given at the United States Naval War College during the 1966-67 term as a part of the Electives Program. These lectures are selected from those in a course entitled *Cold War Operations* which Professor Kirkpatrick presents at Brown. This is the sixth lecture, and the others will be published in the next two issues.)

There are certain aspects of the war in Vietnam which we cannot examine too frequently or in too great detail. A large part of the disquietude in this country about the war is due to a lack of understanding of what the issues are or the stakes involved. The press has probably served to confuse the issues a bit about Vietnam. There are the problems of trying to fight a war on television, with all of its unhappiness, and the

television cameras are only on one side of the war which makes it even more difficult.

We will deal with North Vietnam which is the principal enemy and has an important history. Then we will consider some of the more important issues in the South. Not to be forgotten is the fact that this is another major cold war operation and follows such actions as the Berlin blockade, the war in Korea,

the Cuban revolution, and all of the other various confrontations where communism and anticommunism have met.

The people who criticize our participation in Vietnam often say this is a civil war, and we are intervening. Others say that this is an illegal intervention, and we should not be there. This is almost like saying that great powers should not engage in any type of activities other than within their own borders. It is entirely impractical and inconsistent with the realities. But how we came to be there is important, and, again, all of the facts are not always considered.

The aspect of this war which is unfortunate, but unavoidable, is that we succeeded the French in the area. In the eyes of many we are imperialists like the French. Probably to a great majority of the Vietnamese we are more white faces in an area where the white man is not popular. Further, the Communists captured the nationalist movement in Vietnam in a manner even more effective and efficient than in Eastern Europe.

The method of takeover, the skill and techniques used by Ho Chi Minh and his associates, was responsible for developing North Vietnam into the showcase of communism in a relatively underdeveloped area recently released from colonialism. Ho Chi Minh developed the most effective Communist Party in the world in that area. It is one of the few Communist Parties which has had no major purges in the course of its history. This is an important aspect of the organization and the degree of control that has been exerted. It is a Communist Party of operators more than philosophers. This has been important in its rise to power and its control over the country.

Ho Chi Minh was one of the early founders of the French Communist Party in the 1920's. He joined the Communist Party almost at its in-

ception, became an operative for the Comintern, went to Russia in 1924, then to the Comintern Bureau in the Far East under Borodin. His travels and activities varied. He was imprisoned by the British in Hong Kong. He was in China a good part of this career. He was in Russia during the Stalinist purges. Immediately prior to the start of World War II he was with the Chinese Eighth Route Army and then chief of operations for a guerrilla warfare training cadre in South China. This put him in a strategically advantageous position for developing the Vietnamese Independence Movement in the early part of which there was collaboration with Chinese warlords. The Vietnamese Independent Movement worked with the other nationalistic parties as well as with the Communists.

The organization of the Vietnamese Communist Party took place in 1944. Prior to this the Communists went south into Japanese-occupied Indochina in the Tonkin area and organized the anti-Japanese guerrilla force. They received supplies and support from the OSS.

At the end of the fighting the Communists moved rapidly to take control of Indochina before the Allies could move in. At Potsdam it was agreed that the Chinese Nationalists would liberate Indochina north of the 16th parallel and that the British (the 20th Indian Division) would liberate the southern part. The Chinese were a little dilatory in moving south. It took them 3 months to move from China to Hanoi. They engaged in pilfering en route which did not polarize them as liberators. In the meantime, the Viet Minh had established themselves both there and in Saigon. The Viet Minh were not well received by the commanding officer of the Indian Division in Saigon. The French, when they returned, were less inclined to negotiate with them. The important aspect to remember is that the Viet Minh had established a cadre in

Indochina. They were well organized, well disciplined, and were in an advantageous position to take over.

There is not much that we need to say about the Viet Minh declaration of independence on 2 September 1945. The war of independence against France broke out within a year and went on for the 8 bloody years until 1954 when it was finally ended at the Geneva Conference. The French suffered heavily in this war. De Gaulle made the statement that they thought it best to get out before they destroyed the country. There is probably even more truth in the fact that they had lost most of their stomach for the fight. Dien Bien Phu was a major military catastrophe. The French high command did not believe that the Viet Minh could bring in artillery and was convinced that if they could entice the Viet Minh into a pitched battle the Viet Minh could be destroyed. By the use of some 40,000 coolies with bicycles, the Viet Minh brought in artillery and destroyed the French force fighting ability at Dien Bien Phu. For this, General Giap, the Viet Minh commander, has received tremendous credit as a soldier. Following the French defeat, Giap put together what, prior to 1965, was generally recognized as one of the best armies in the Far East—an army of some 350,000 with about two million trained reserves.

One aspect of the Communist Party in North Vietnam that should be stressed is that it is a very small party. The North Vietnamese Communist Party has only about 500,000 members, proportionately a small number compared to the population. It is a party of the middle class. It is not proletariat and not peasant. It is intellectual. Of the leaders in the North Vietnamese Communist Party, about 70 percent of them are from the middle class, mostly intellectuals.

The Communist revolution in North Vietnam did not go through many phases that were experienced in other

countries. Ninety-eight percent of the tilled land in the country was owned by the peasants prior to World War II. Collectivization of agriculture was not giving land to peasants. The land was taken from the peasants who were organized into collectives. By 1960 the farmers were organized into 41,000 agricultural collectives. Urban workers were organized into cooperatives.

One of the problems for North Vietnam has been a shortage of workers and skilled labor which has not rendered their effort to industrialize the country any easier. The North Vietnamese received assistance from Russia and from the other Communist powers. Industrialization did not proceed, with the consequence that bombing of North Vietnam is hitting an area where there will be greater and greater difficulty in repairing the damage.

What this all adds up to is, first, a very tightly controlled country under a Party which has been relatively free of the traumatic experiences of purges and counterpurges which always upset any organization, even a tightly disciplined Communist Party; second, a country under the thorough and complete control of the Party organization; and, third, one in which even though there are differences among the Party leaders in their loyalties to Peking or Moscow, there is nevertheless unity in their efforts.

Before leaving North Vietnam we should note the skillful fence-straddling they have been doing on the Sino-Soviet split. When the Chinese walked out of the 22nd Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in Moscow in 1961, Ho Chi Minh was present. He also walked out. Unlike the Chinese who first isolated themselves in their quarters and then left the Soviet Union, Ho went on a public relations tour around Russian Europe. He made statements conciliatory to the Russians without committing himself against the Chinese. Before the 23rd Party Congress

in March 1966, Le Duan, the General Secretary of the North Vietnamese Party and probably Ho's successor, stopped over in Peking en route to Moscow, and it was generally known that he was trying to persuade the Chinese to go to the Party Congress. He also was explaining to the Chinese why the North Vietnamese felt it essential to go even though the Chinese were trying to dissuade them. It is important to North Vietnam not to take sides in this issue. They would suffer if supplies were cut off by either Russia or China.

Let us now look at the political aspects of the war in South Vietnam. When I was last in Saigon, in 1964, I talked to General Khiem who was then the Defense Minister, about the war and asked for his frank appraisal as to Viet Cong strength. He made a statement which I think is significant. He said 80 percent of the Viet Cong strength is indigenous to South Vietnam. I used this statement once in a talk in St. Louis, and it was quoted as my saying that 80 percent of the Communist strength was in South Vietnam. This isn't what he meant; he meant that 80 percent of the strength was in the population of South Vietnam, in the villages and in the hamlets. The major elements that have suffered in recent fighting have been the hard core indigenous Viet Cong combat strength; the village and regional guerrilla cadres that are farmers by day and fighters by night. The national level of the central fighting force probably has not suffered quite as greatly. The testimony of a defector to the effect that the southern fighting body would not be able to maintain itself without the reinforcements from North Vietnam is pertinent in this regard. Americans, in general, do not understand the Communist strength in South Vietnam and the conditions that brought it about.

At the end of the French war South Vietnam had very little to build on. Emperor Bao Dai had avoided troubled

areas and spent a large portion of his time on the French Riviera and, when not there, on the Vietnamese Riviera. He was succeeded by Ngo Dinh Diem. Diem came from a prominent Catholic family. One of his brothers had been assassinated in the North, another was archbishop of Hue, a third was an administrator in the central provinces, and the fourth, Nhu, was to become his closest adviser. Diem was selected because he looked as good as anybody. The selection choice was very, very thin indeed. The comment is often made, "Why did we select Diem in the first place?" and then again, "Why did we abandon him and he was assassinated, if we were not indeed implicated in the assassination?" Both of these questions are readily explainable. The selection in the first place was taking a man who seemed to have the potentialities and there were very few others that did, either among senior Vietnamese civilian intellectuals or among any in the military area at that time.

Diem inherited no civil service; his country had been run on a colonial basis up until that particular time. The economy was concentrated, as it is in a great deal of Asia, in the hands of few. There were fewer land owning peasants in the South than in the North. What happened to Diem was that as any leader frustrated by failure, slightly paranoid to begin with, he became more and more isolated from his country, from his military services, from his bureaucracy; became more and more the captive of his brother and his sister-in-law; gradually developed even a hostility toward the United States until finally Ambassador Nolting (who was a man to whom Diem could look for sympathy) had reached the end of rapport with him; and the coup and assassination took place. At the time of the coup Diem was offered sanctuary in the American Embassy and could have accepted rather than leaving the palace and going to the church where he was

picked up and then assassinated.

As far as American implication in the coup is concerned, the allegations usually revolve around CIA. The general feeling was that there might have been some American involvement. In Vietnam in 1963 if the United States did not support a senior official this gave a hunting license to those opposed to him. With the growing and obvious American dissatisfaction with Diem widely heralded in the press, the results were almost predictable. All too often we feel that a change in government will be made with the restraint that we show and not with the violence that other countries of the world often show.

After Diem was overthrown there were eight governments in South Vietnam—five military and three civilian—until the elections of 1967.

What is South Vietnam? Ambassador Lodge stated that South Vietnam is not a country but a group of peoples not necessarily dedicated to or loyal to the central government in Saigon, often much more oriented to the village, district, or the provincial chiefs. There are the Tonkinese in the North, Annamites along the coastal plain area, and in the South, Cochinese. A large Chinese minority population is centered in the Saigon area, Cholon being an all-Chinese city. The Montagnards in the mountainous areas are fiercely independent of the lowlands. There are also Montagnard types in North Vietnam who have been given relative autonomy and are less troublesome.

There has always been the problem, an inheritance from colonial days, of corruption and the inadequacy of the bureaucracy. The corruption arises partly because the civil service is not well paid. Corrupt officials do not stimulate loyalty to the central government. The Communists were quick to take advantage of this.

General Ky, talking about the problems of pacification, made this statement, "To make pacification possi-

ble we must get rid of corrupt officers and officials." Here is one reason why pacification is not progressing, why American officials are disenchanted and frustrated at trying to get their opposite numbers in Vietnam to do something.

The success of Communist control in South Vietnam is a simple and easy cycle. The Viet Cong goes into a village with well-organized and well-prepared teams. They bring what the villagers need even though they also tax and conscript soldiers. The Viet Cong generally avoid pilfering, but they will get control if not by peaceful means then by terror. They will attempt peaceful means first. If this does not succeed they will abduct or murder the village chief or the Saigon officials. If these officials are corrupt, the villagers want to be rid of them. If the officials are not corrupt, the Viet Cong will eliminate them because then they are dangerous to the Viet Cong, and the terror gives them a system of control. The government obviously will never acquire control until it can win the loyalty of the villagers and until the villagers are certain that the Viet Cong will not be back. So the whole vicious cycle here is that we will not control the countryside in South Vietnam until it can be occupied and until the people know that the Government is there to stay, that the Government officials are honest and reasonably efficient in their controls.

Some ask why do we support an authoritarian military government? The answer is fairly obvious. We have been trying to the best of our ability to avoid taking over the Government of Vietnam and directing its activities. Among the most unenviable jobs of the U.S. Government must be those of the military commander and the Ambassador in Vietnam. They are in the position of trying to convince our "allies" to do the right things militarily and politically. Agreement must be obtained by reasoning and persuasion rather than telling

them to do it. We are in the purgatory between not being able to run the war ourselves and having an ally who is going to make mistakes and follow national traits contrary to ours. So we are going to be blamed for what the Vietnamese do. We are going to be blamed for the fact that when the Vietnamese take a prisoner, rather than our normal methods of interrogating prisoners of war, they feel that there are faster and more effective methods. These methods will be seen on television and atrocity charges will be made. We have to persuade our allies to observe the Geneva Conventions, because if they do not then the North may well decide to say, "We'll ignore them fully." This will be more to our detriment than to the detriment of the South Vietnamese.

Pacification of the country must be achieved before there can be an end to the fighting. I doubt whether this country either will or can afford to send the number of troops required to occupy all of South Vietnam. In 1966 U.S. troops moved into the delta areas for the first time and have been required to hold more and more of the country. More and more we're moving into the position of having to take over a greater and greater aspect of the war.

What is the role of the war in Vietnam in the struggle with communism on a worldwide basis? The Russians have frequently indicated a desire to get this particular issue settled. The aspect of this war that affects the Russians is that they do not feel they can join in any greater detente or understanding with the United States while a war involving a Communist or socialist power is going on. The Russians are having trouble keeping their friends and allies in the other Communist countries and Communist Parties convinced that the Chinese are not right in alleging that they are closer to the United States than they are to the socialist movement. The Russians are very seriously concerned at the speed of

the Chinese development of nuclear weapons and of the development of the delivery capability for these weapons. Reports have been coming in fairly steadily of increased Russian military efforts along the border with China. The Russians are worried about the potentialities of nuclear proliferation in such areas as the Middle East. They are worried about Japan and India developing nuclear weapons on their own. There is a true desire in the Soviet Union and the high command of the Kremlin to want to get this war over without too great a loss of face on either side. However, the Soviet Union will continue to provide full support to North Vietnam to prevent its defeat.

As Moscow probably views the war, the difficulty with it continuing is not only the general dangers of further escalation which might be required in order to bring it to an end, but the fact that the Russians do not know any better than we do under what circumstances the Chinese might consider that their national interests are threatened and decide to intervene in North Vietnam. This is an important consideration in their calculations.

An aspect of the war in Vietnam more important to the Chinese than to the Russians is the matter of Communist influence in Asia. If the Vietnamese settle for the cessation of hostilities, which would appear to be a complete loss of prestige as far as Asia is concerned, it would be even a greater setback to communism in Asia than the Indonesian revolt. The problem which confronts the Russians is, "How do they work toward a settlement in Vietnam without opening themselves to allegations from the other socialist powers that they have sold the North Vietnamese down the river?"

It is obvious that Hanoi believes it has more staying power as far as this war is concerned than we do. They have manpower. They can continue to send more troops into South Vietnam for the

indefinite future. They have the discipline and dedication to continue. They have been willing to see vast destruction in the North. How much more punishment they are willing to endure is difficult to assess.

The next issue is, "Do the Communists insist on a reunited Vietnam?" It is my opinion they do not. In many ways the Geneva Accords of 1954 were a great bonus to the Communists of North Vietnam. It gave them an area in which they had undisputed sovereignty for the completion of their Communist revolution and for the full establishment of their controls. This is a point that is not always brought out in discussion of the Vietnam problem when people use the Geneva Accords against the United States. The United States never did become a signatory nor did the South Vietnamese. But the Geneva Accords did give the North Vietnamese Communists control which they did not have before.

The National Liberation Front is like the Saigon Government. It is not composed of all Northerners or Southerners, and it is not necessarily all Communists. It is simply a group, and its name is very apt, "front." It is a front in the strict Communist sense of the word. It undoubtedly does represent a segment of the population of South Vietnam. There are Southerners and Saigonese in the National Liberation Front. It also does represent the North Vietnamese Communists. Liaison officers from Hanoi have fairly tight control over what goes on in South Vietnam. And it is through this vehicle that the Foreign Bureau of the North Vietnamese Communist Party exercises its controls over the cadres in the South.

The Viet Cong, in the territories under its control, has established a parallel civil government. In effect, there is dual government in many areas of South Vietnam, the Viet Cong system, and the Republic of Vietnam system side by side in the same areas.

The National Liberation Front's role in any peace negotiation will be a limited one. It is not certain that even though they do draw support in the South they have the ability to control their constituencies. Our Government has been wise in agreeing that the National Liberation Front can be represented at the peace table.

The other aspect in discussing the potentialities for settlement is the Saigon Government itself. Saying it is northern dominated is like saying that the U.S. Congress is southern dominated. Both are a mixture of both North and South.

There is also the religious question. The question most frequently asked is, "If the Buddhists are the majority, why

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Professor Lyman B. Kirkpatrick, Jr., was educated at Princeton University; he is presently Professor of Political Science at Brown University.

Prior to World War II, Professor Kirkpatrick worked for the U.S. News Publishing Corporation, and during the war he served in the Office of Strategic Services on the staff of Gen. Omar Bradley's 12th Army Group as intelligence briefing officer. At the end of World War II he returned briefly to the U.S. News as editor of *World Report* and then went to the Central Intelligence Agency, where he served in a variety of positions, including Division Chief, Assistant Director, Executive Assistant to the Director, Inspector General, and, from 1962 to 1965, Executive Director. In 1965 he left the Central Intelligence Agency to become Professor of Political Science at Brown University.

For his service in World War II, Professor Kirkpatrick received the Legion of Merit, Bronze Star, European Theater Ribbon with five battle stars, and both the French and Belgian Croix de Guerre. In March 1960, Professor Kirkpatrick was chosen by the National Service League as one of the 10 outstanding career officers in the Federal Government.

are the Catholics running the country?" The Buddhists are a numerical majority. Most of the Buddhists are not religiously active but are more Confucious. Active Buddhists probably do not number much more than a million, not many more than the Catholics. Further, the majority of the intellectuals and leaders of South Vietnam are Catholic.

What terms would be acceptable to Hanoi and the National Liberation Front? One of the problems in getting to negotiations is a lack of communication. We are not really getting through to Hanoi in understandable terms, and they do not believe what we say. It may be working in reverse to a certain degree also.

I think that the North Vietnamese will accept a settlement in which there is an assurance of eventual U.S. withdrawal; whether the President's offer of 6 months that he made at Manila is appropriate or not, it is hard to say, because there are so many other factors involved. The United States could not withdraw until an international force of some size had moved in to replace it. Otherwise it is turning the country over to the Viet Cong. I think the North Vietnamese will accept a divided country, at least for a period of time. It may be necessary to accept an international force which will occupy only South Vietnam and not all of Vietnam.

The next point is, "How big an international force?" It probably will be the most sizeable international force ever assembled if there is going to be any possibility whatsoever of establishing a semblance of civil control and order in the South. In 2 or 3 years after the end of hostilities an election might

be held in which people could vote with reasonable freedom. The reason I say 2 or 3 years is that it is going to take that long once the fighting is over before a sense of security can be achieved. Once the Viet Cong has agreed to lay down its arms and move North, there will be violations of any cease-fire. After the cease-fire in 1954, 3,000 caches of arms were found in the South. Communist technique is to come back and plan to come back. So there would have to be very strict controls. One of the thorny issues will be the occupying force. The issue is whether it will be the Irish, the Nigerians, and the Brazilians, or others either uncommitted or at least relatively uncommitted, or whether it will also involve perhaps even occupation by the major powers.

The question arises, "Will the Chinese allow the North Vietnamese to settle?" The Chinese cannot stop the North Vietnamese if the Russians want a settlement. Agreement on armistice by the United States and Russia would confront the Chinese with facing one, or the other, or both of the superpowers.

There are domestic factors in the United States affecting a settlement in Vietnam. The Vietnamese war is a major domestic issue. The cost of the war is constantly rising, necessitating cuts in other areas and tax increases. The amount of personnel committed, the amount of material required, are all important issues. The most important aspect of this issue will be the settlement. If it looks like we are moving out to let the Communists come in and take over, there will be a violent reaction. The country may realize that there may be a coalition government in the South.