

RECONCILIATION WITH VIETNAM

by Observer

Reconciliation with Vietnam and its heroic and long-suffering people come at last. President Bill Clinton has agreed to normalise US-Vietnam relations.

From Indochina to Vietnam, the country had a tortuous history of struggle for liberation against foreign domination -- Chinese, French, Japanese, American.

During World War II, the valiant Indochinese people fought against Japanese occupation. With the defeat of the Japanese, Vietnam, like Berlin, was partitioned to maintain big-powers harmony : the socialists/communists in the North and the capitalists in the South.

COLONIALISM

The colonial powers - the French in Indochina, the Dutch in Indonesia and the British in Malaya -- who had been evicted during the war by the Japanese, decided to return and reimpose their stranglehold.

Rationalisation for the reimposition of colonial rule was dramatically put by a British member of Parliament. In a debate in the House of Commons, he said that if Malaya fell, the British people would have to do without breakfast. Malaya, with her tin and rubber, was Britain's main dollar earner. The Dutch and the French took the same position.

This led to national liberation wars and brutal suppression. Gurkha troops and Dyak head-hunters were used in Malaya. A price of 30,000 pounds sterling was offered for the capture of Chin Peng, dead or alive, -- Chin Peng had earlier been honoured on Victory Day (V-E) Parade in London for his heroism against Japanese aggression and occupation.

LIBERATION

Sukarno expelled the Dutch from Indonesia and in 1955 organised the famous Bandung Conference, the ^{de}predecessor to the Non-Aligned Movement in Belgrade, Yugoslavia in 1961.

The French were disastrously defeated in 1954 at Dien Bien Phu, the so-called impregnable military base in Vietnam.

The Geneva Conference in 1954 agreed that elections should be held in 1956 for the unification of North and South Vietnam.

But the administration of President Dwight Eisenhower cancelled the elections and installed Ngo Dinh-Diem as head of the South Vietnamese government. The cancellation was done because the communists would have won, and Vietnam would have become a united nation. This was made clear by Eisenhower in his book, Mandate for Change : the White House Years, : "...had elections been as of the time of the fighting, possibly 80 percent of the population would have voted for the Communist Ho Chi Minh as their leader rather than Chief of State, Bao Dai."

STRATEGIC

Eisenhower's strategic and political concern about Southeast Asia was expressed at the Annual Conference of Governors in 1953, a year before the disastrous defeat of the French in Vietnam, when he had bluntly stated:

"...Now let us assume that we lost Indochina. If Indochina goes several things happen right away. The Malaya Peninsula, the last little bit of land hanging on down there, would be scarcely

defensible. The tin and tungsten we so greatly value from that area would cease coming...

"All of that position around there is very ominous to the United States, because finally if we lost all that, how would the free world hold the rich empire of Indonesia?"

"So you see, somewhere along the line, this must be blocked and it must be blocked now, and that's what we are trying to do.

"So when the United States voted \$400,000,000. to help that war, we are out to prevent the occurrence of something that would be of a most terrible significance to the USA, our security, our power and ability to get certain things we need from the riches of the Indonesia territory and from Southeast Asia."

✓ The United States was not unduly concerned so long as the French controlled ^{China} Indonesia. But after the defeat of France, ^{Vietnam and} the whole Southeast area assumed strategic importance.

RAW MATERIALS

The importance of raw materials for the US economy was emphasised in 1952 in the Report of the Materials Policy Commission, headed by William S. Paley, which had noted that the "United States

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appetite for raw materials is gargantuan - and so far, insatiable". In 1900, US produced 15 per cent more raw materials that it consumed; by 1950, the position was reversed - it consumed 9 per cent more than it produced. And it was projected that the position would worsen later; by 1975, it consumed about 20 per cent more!

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It is in this context, must be viewed the overthrow of the democratically-elected governments of Mohammad Mossadegh in Iran, PPP in British Guiana and Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala and US armed intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965.

As regards Iran, after the downfall of the Mossadegh Government in June 1953, Nelson Rockefeller in a report to President Eisenhower stated: "We should not ignore the vital fact that virtually all our natural rubber, manganese, chromium and tin, as well as substantial proportions of our zinc, copper and oil and a third or more of the lead and aluminum we need comes from abroad, and, furthermore, that it is chiefly drawn from the underdeveloped areas of Africa and Asia, which are in the orbit of one or other of the military alliances built by the U.S. This

is also true of a major part of our super-strategic material (uranium ore particularly).

u The most significant example in practice of what I mean, was the Iranian experiment with which, as you will remember, I was directly concerned. By the use of economic aid we succeeded in getting access to Iranian Oil and we are now well established in the economy of that country. The strengthening of our economic position in Iran has enabled us to acquire control over her entire foreign policy and in particular to make her join the Baghdad Pact. At the present time the Shah would not dare even to make any changes in his Cabinet without consulting our Ambassador."

MONOPOLY

Just before the overthrow by British troops in October 1953 of the PPP Government, an American Congressman D.L. Jackson was a house guest of the Governor. He stated on the eve of his departure that British Guiana was within the strategic zone of the United States with valuable resources like high-grade bauxite and other minerals.

As in Iran, the CIA claimed credit for the overthrow in 1954 by Colonel Castillo-Armas of the Arbenz Government, in

the interest of the powerful monopoly, the United Fruit Company. This company dominated Guatemala just as Booker, McConnell and Company Ltd did in British Guiana (British Guiana was called Booker's Guiana).

Like Colonel Perez Jimenez who had overthrown in 1945 the elected Romulo Gallegos Government in Venezuela, Castillo-Armas was rewarded by the Eisenhower administration. He was given an honorary doctorate degree by the University of Columbia during Eisenhower's term as President of the institution - an award which so infuriated Romulo Gallegos that he renounced the doctorate degree conferred on him by the same university.

HUMAN RIGHTS

The war in Vietnam was escalated by the Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon administration. Under President Jimmy Carter, the USA ~~abandoned the~~ ^{softened its} "Big Stick" and embarked on a Human Rights Crusade.

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The gargantuan, insatiable appetite for raw materials was one reason for the escalation of the war in Vietnam. But equally, if not more, important, was the ideological/geo-political and the changing world balance of forces.

With the defeat of Hitler and world fascism, and the spread, at the end of World War II, of socialist ideas and Soviet influence in East Europe and beyond, the policy of "containment of communism" was enunciated with the Truman Doctrine in 1947. The "Roosevelt approach" was jettisoned.

By the late 1950's, the world balance of forces had made a significant shift in favour of national and social liberation -- India, Pakistan and Burma became independent in 1947; the Dutch were expelled from Indonesia; the Chinese Communist Party came to power in China in 1949; the corrupt King Farouk was overthrown in Egypt by Colonels Neguib and Nasser in 1952 and the British were forced out of its military base in the Suez Canal Zone; the French were defeated in Indochina in 1954 and were facing defeat

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in Algeria; Egypt under Col. Nasser became a strong pillar of the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM); the Anglo-French-Israeli attack against Egypt in 1956 was defeated; the 1958 Kassim revolution in Iraq destroyed the regime of Nuri es-Said and broke up the Baghdad Pact; Sekou Toure opted out of the French Community and declared Guinea independent; the 26th July Movement came to power in Cuba in 1959.

GEOPOLITICS

These developments changed the geo-political equation dramatically. Communism became the enemy from "without and within." And the emphasis changed from "containment" to "liberation."

General Dwight Eisenhower, who had been Commander-in-Chief during World War II, spelt out the mood of the cold warriors during the 1952 US election campaign. An exponent of "peace through strength", he called for action. "The government with cold finality", he declared, "must tell the Kremlin that we shall never recognise the slightest permanence of Russia's position in Eastern Europe and Asia". He read out a long list of countries which he said

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were "suffocating from the Russian pall" and added: "The conscience of America can never know ease until these people are restored to the society of free men."

This caused a sharp comment from the Eastern European Observer on August 30, 1952:

"Even the British Press showed its anxiety at this outburst and tried to dismiss it as electioneering. But Eisenhower was saying in public what the architects of the Atlantic Pact have been saying in private for years. This is the US counterpart of Churchill's demand for the 'liberation of the ancient capitals of Europe'".

MCCARTHYISM

This attitude spawned "McCarthyism", a special brand of anti-communist hysteria, inside the United States in the early 1950's.

It meant jettisoning the approach of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the Yalta and Potsdam Agreements, (signed by Roosevelt and after Roosevelt's death by Harry Truman, Churchill and Stalin) which blueprinted, towards the end of World War II, the shape of a post-war Europe and the world.

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Credit must be given to President Harry Truman for realism. He sacked General Douglas Mac Arthur, the Far East World War II hero, who wanted to use the atom bomb on China, after the Chinese Government had sent troops to aid North Korea in the Korean war in 1950, and helped to evict the USA/UN force from North Korea.

The cold warrior Winston Churchill also became a realist. He was prepared by 1953 to accept the existence of the Soviet Union and to deal with it on the basis of an accommodation and peaceful coexistence. By this time, when the USSR had already developed the Atomic Bomb and the Hydrogen Bomb, Churchill knew that it was no longer a practical proposition to "liberate" Eastern Europe.

On May 11, 1953, he declared that "Russia has a right to feel assured as far as human arrangements can reach that the terrible events of the Hitler invasion will never be repeated and that Poland will remain a friendly power and a buffer." To the credit of this arch-imperialist, it must be said that in a speech to the Germans at Aachen in May, 1956, he said : "In a true unity of Europe, Russia must have her part... We must realise how deep and sincere are Russia's anxieties about the safety of her

homeland from foreign invasion."

But the converted "dove" as regards the Soviet Union remained a "hawk" with respect to the British Empire. His Government in October 1853 despatched troops to British Guiana and removed the PPP from government.

DOMINO THEORY

Eisenhower's domino theory -- if Vietnam fell to the communists the whole of Southeast Asia would fall -- was propelled by the nightmare vision of Dean Rusk, Secretary of State in the John F Kennedy administration. Carol Brightman and Michael Uhl in "Bombing for the Hell of It" in the The Nation (12 June 1995 p826) quotes Rusk: "The integrity of the US commitment is the principal pillar of peace throughout the world... If that commitment becomes unreliable, the Communists would draw conclusions that would lead to our ruin and almost certainly to catastrophic war."

This nightmare vision was not based on reality. Brightman and Uhl writes that Mao Zedong and Zhou En-lai approached Roosevelt as early as January 1945 "trying to establish relations with the

United States to avoid total dependence on the Soviet Union" (as a State Department document later reported). But there was no response. This was disclosed at a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing in 1969, when China scholar Allen Whiting testified that information about the overture was suppressed because it contradicted "the image of monolithic Communism directed from Moscow."

STIFF LETTER

It is the same nightmarish approach which caused Rusk to move against the PPP Government in the early 1960's. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. in his book A Thousand Days : John F Kennedy in the White House, stated that after Premier Cheddi Jagan met President Kennedy in late 1961, the State Department at first thought of trying to work with the PPP, "then Rusk personally revised this policy in a stiff letter early in 1962" to the British.

Schlesinger was then Special Advisor to President Kennedy. He too, as stated in his book, had played a role in bringing down the PPP Government. After meeting L.F.S Burnham at the White House in May 1962, he had recommended to Kennedy that Burnham

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should be supported and put in power, and the way to defeat the PPP was a change from the traditional first-past-the-post, constituency system of voting to proportional representation (PR).

Later, in April 1990, at the office of The Nation, Schlisinger admitted that he was sorry for what he had done thirty years before, and that "a great injustice was done to Cheddi Jagan."

This rare type of admission of political blunder was also done recently by Robert S McNamara, Secretary of Defence in the Kennedy administration. In his book, IN RETROSPECT: THE TRAGEDY AND LESSONS OF VIETNAM, he concedes that the post-war policy of containment never should have been applied to Indochina. "Our misjudgements of friend and foe alike," he admits, "reflected our profound ignorance of the history, culture and politics of the people in the area." In an interview, he told Carol Brightman and Michael Uhl: "We looked on Ho Chi Minh as an associate of Stalin and a believer in Khrushchev, whereas I think he was probably an Asian Tito."

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Moreover, Brightman and Uhl in their review of McNamara's book writes: 'Why did successive administrations ignore the testimony of O.S.S. Officers, such as Archimedes Patti (Why Vietnam? Prelude to America's Albatross), who were based in southern China and Vietnam in 1945-46 and knew firsthand of Ho Chi Minh's repeated attempts to enlist American support for an independent and nonaligned Vietnam? The Pentagon Papers reports a cable from an American diplomat in Hanoi about the letters Ho wrote President Truman requesting the United States "to support the idea of Vietnamese independence according to the Philippines example," a startling proposition that might have extended to Vietnam the semi-autonomous status of a client state in the American orbit. The Letters were never answered.'

Similarly, in Guyana, Cheddi Jagan's pleas were ignored. When external pressure was exerted to delay Guyana's independence on the ground that an independent Guyana would become not only another Cuba, but an even greater danger than Cuba, Premier Jagan told the Latin American Group at the United Nations that in view of that propaganda and fear, he was prepared on independence to sign a treaty of neutrality like Austria to be guaranteed by the

United Nations and big powers, East and West. But this was ignored in the context of anti-communist and anti-Cuban hysteria.

CONFESSIOIN

The "dirty war" in Vietnam was traumatic both for the American people and the Vietnamese people. It cost more American lives than any other war. And it split America in two.

And the sacrifice of the Vietnamese people in lives and property was enormous -- nearly one million military fatalities, and 282,405 Vietnamese who are recorded as missing in action, which is more that a hundred times the number of American M.I.A's.

Did the United States by invading a sovereign state commit a war of aggression and war crimes? Brighton and Uhl cited Telford Taylor, Chief Counsel for the Prosecution at the wartime trials against Japan, saying in 1971 that if the standards applied at Nuremberg and at the Manila trial of Gen. Tomoyuki Yamashita were applied to former Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara and special assistants Mr George Bundy and Walt Rostow, "there would be a very strong possibility that

they would come to the same end he [Yamashita] did."

President Clinton has put the past to rest. By recognising Vietnam, he is putting the United States on a path of international law and justice in today's "Global Village", like President F.D. Roosevelt's "Good Neighbour Policy."

And to settle the "mistake", now that diplomatic relations have been established, the reparations the United States agreed to, after the Paris Peace Accord of 1973, should be paid.

It's good that McNamara has admitted guilt in the same way that Schlesinger had done for Guyana. It is high time that those involved inside Guyana do the same. Confession is good for the soul.