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SOME LESSONS FROM FAILURE IN VIETNAM

Daniel Ellsberg

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PREFACE

In June, 1968, I attended a conference at the Adlai Stevenson Institute, Chicago, on the subject, "Vietnam: Lessons and Mislessons."

Harper and Rowe have now published an edited (mainly, reorganized) transcript of the proceedings, "No More Vietnams?", edited by Richard Pfeffer. The Atlantic Monthly published some excerpts in its November and December, 1968 issues (including several of my comments below).

My own contribution at the Conference was in the form of extemporaneous oral comments on the formal papers and discussion, generally bearing on "lessons of Vietnam." I reproduced transcriptions of these for RAND internal use earlier, and issue them now as a Paper in response to several requests. They have been edited lightly -- the transcriptions were very unreliable -- but they preserve oral syntax. (The edited version here differs very slightly from the published version.)

I did not attempt to expand or modify my conference remarks, which were each subject to a strict four-minute limitation, and which were generally responsive to some specific preceding comments by others, or more often, to a written paper. Thus, in no case should my comments be interpreted as anything like a comprehensive, or adequate, or indeed, more than suggestive discussion of the particular subject. (The comments on failure to learn, for example, and on "anti-learning mechanisms" -- referring to such phenomena as the one-year turnover in U.S. personnel, and deceptively optimistic reporting -- demand concrete examples and amplification, which I propose to provide elsewhere.) Nor do they reflect my own sense of priorities on the most important lessons of Vietnam.

I have preceded each comment with a pertinent passage (in some cases, one out of several) to which I was responding. And in the interests of historical honesty, or perhaps masochism, I have left in a prediction of mine -- on the probable fate of Saigon in 1968 -- that was not, I am happy to say, fulfilled.

SOME LESSONS FROM FAILURE IN VIETNAM

Daniel Ellsberg*

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I. THE AMERICAN WAY OF WAR

Theordore Draper: " 'Massive retaliation,' that monstrous doctrine of the 1950's, saved us from large-scale intervention in Vietnam in 1954. But its successor, variously known as 'limited war,' 'graduated response' or 'flexible response,' did not save us from increasingly large-scale intervention in Vietnam since 1961 and especially since 1965. In fact, I think the doctrine of 'limited war' as it was worked out in the latter half of the 1950's outside the government and taken over by the government in the 1960's must be held partially responsible for pulling us in."

Ellsberg: I do not really agree that it was the theory of limited war that encouraged Americans to favor our Vietnam decision in 1965. I think it was something else, some attitudes and expectations associated with the American way of war.

Specifically, there has been in the U.S. since the Second World War a widespread belief in the efficacy and acceptability of aerial bombing, and in particular of bombing of a strategic nature, aimed at the will of the opponents via his industrial and population resources. This belief played a critical, if not decisive, role in getting us into Vietnam, in reassuring us, in giving us confidence to stay in, and then in stimulating escalation while keeping us reassured as to ultimate success.

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In 1961, the group of men most in favor of an enlarged intervention, including the sending of ground troops, was headed by Maxwell Taylor and Walt Rostow. These two pointed, as early as 1961, to the essential problem of stopping infiltration. They took the point of view, rightly or wrongly, that the problem in the South would be insoluble until we were able to stop infiltration from the North, not as it was then but as it could become.

It was clearly stated by them that we must go in with the recognition, especially if we were successful in the early stages, that we could anticipate a high level of infiltration, which somehow would have to be stopped. These people, both privately and publicly, indicated there was only one effective way to stop infiltration - that, of course, was through bombing.

Thus, their recommendation for expanded U.S. involvement in Vietnam rested on the implicit assumptions that bombing would be used against the North when - as was likely - it became necessary, and that it would be effective. Kennedy may or may not have accepted this reasoning or conclusion; the record is not clear. However, given attitudes within the defense bureaucracy and the larger American public, it would have been difficult, even for the President, explicitly to reject this "solution" in advance. Really, no other proposal was ever seriously made for dealing with that essential problem.

In 1965 - when we felt ourselves in trouble in Vietnam in a number of ways, especially with regard to the need to demonstrate our commitment - Johnson was not prepared immediately to send troops; but one thing that came easy to an American president was a demonstration by bombing. In other ways as well, bombing was the natural solution to our problems; it was the key ingredient in our policy that was going, one way or another, to make everything turn out all right. And in 1966 and 1967, despite disappointments, these same hopes persisted and sustained our continued and expanded involvement.

Recently, a former Ambassador to the U.S. from Vietnam has expressed a plea that, despite his deep pessimism about the prospects today in Vietnam, we should not precipitously withdraw. He said he

was against our immediate withdrawal even though he believed life under the Communists would be better than the continuation of this war: which since 1965 - not since 1961 or 1964, but since the bombings of 1965 in South Vietnam and since we came in there with our troops - has begun to demolish his society, to turn it into a vast zoo, a vast refugee camp. Despite this belief, the Ambassador could not be for ending the war at the cost of a quick Communist victory because he felt that would encourage the North Vietnamese in their most aggressive aspects. In that case he foresaw that within five years the Vietnamese would be doing things in Thailand which would cause us then totally to destroy Vietnam.

The calling in of Americans and our subsequent bombing in North and South Vietnam has not brought success; hence the bombing and shelling in the South has gone on long enough to disrupt the society of South Vietnam enormously, and probably permanently. In general, if local governments who call for American aid are in other respects acting effectively, then any bombing we may do need not last very long and the resulting damage will not be permanent. But if these governments face a strong enemy who can frustrate them and the U.S. and prolong the war, then the damage done by American bombs and artillery can be irrevocable.

We are talking here about lessons for us to learn about ourselves, and lessons for others - including those who might ask our aid in the future - to learn about us, from our experience in Vietnam and elsewhere.

The lesson which can be drawn here is one the rest of the world, I am sure, has drawn more quickly than Americans have: that, to paraphrase H. Rap Brown, bombing is as American as cherry pie. If you invite us in to do your hard fighting for you, then you get bombing and heavy shelling along with our troops.

Many of us in Vietnam believed that we were there because we should win, and that we could win, though not by the methods we had been using. "Of course, I am against the kind of bombing we are doing;" I can hear myself, with others, saying this hundreds and hundreds of times.

I protected myself, I am afraid, from perceiving what should have been easily foreseeable - especially easy were I not American and terribly reluctant to realize it -- namely, that if you bring in Americans like me, as part of a heavy U.S. combat involvement, you are going to get both strategic and widespread tactical bombing and heavy use of artillery along with us, no matter how critical these particular individuals may be of it.

If you ask what will happen in Thailand if we go in militarily and have to face prolonged oppostiion, the answer is bombing and shelling.

If you ask what would have happened if the Dominican Republic had chosen to oppose us, the answer is that the Dominican Republic probably would have been heavily bombed.

Indeed, a most ominous lesson is there to be drawn by the people of nations whose leaders might call for U.S. military support: that such a plea - if the national leader knew that the conflict would be long and the U.S. military commitment great - could amount to an act of treachery against his society.

II. THE BASIS OF PUBLIC REVULSION

Samuel Huntington: "While U.S. involvement in Vietnam was one aspect of the broader post war pattern of U.S. expansion I previously referred to, the trauma resulting from the war, was the product of a fundamental shift in attitudes toward the costs and benefits of American expansion. The type of involvement which in the 1950's could be viewed as desirable and necessary became in the 1960's a highly dubious venture. By 1967, of course, the costs to the U.S. -- in money and troop commitments -- of the Vietnamese war exceeded those of the Korean War.

"Opposition to the war, however, focused less on these material costs than on the moral and ideological issues. In comparison to the Korean War the Vietnamese war has been a relatively limited, and undestructive conflict. In one year of fighting almost every major city in North and South Korea was virtually leveled to the ground. Up to mid-1968 the only major Vietnamese city which has received anything like this treatment was Hue. In Korea somewhere between two and

three million civilians were killed directly or indirectly by the war. The civilian suffering in Vietnam, however bad it may be, was little by comparison. Senator Edward M. Kennedy estimates the civilian casulaties in South Vietnam at about 100,000 a year, only some of which were fatalities. At that current rate, the Vietnamese war could thus go on for twenty years before the total civilian casualties (killed and wounded) in South Vietnam equalled the minimum estimate of civilians killed in Korea.

"American outrage at the war thus reflected less the war than it did the impact of TV and, more basically, a fundamental change in American attitudes -- official and informed toward American involvement in international affairs. It is, of course, easy to say with hindsight that this change was predictable. It was also in fact, however, predicted. The shift in opinion on foreign policy in the mid-1960's "appears to be simply the latest manifestation of a regular alternation of American attitudes towards foreign affairs between introversion and extroversion. Using a variety of indicators, including naval expenditures, annexations, armed expeditions, diplomatic pressures, and attention devoted to foreign affairs in presidential messages and party platforms, Frank L. Klingberg has chartered these alternations in mood since the Revolutionary War. Beginning in 1776 American attitudes toward international affairs have gone through eight alternating phases of introversion and extroversion as follows:

Introversion	Extroversion
1776-1798	1798-1824
1824-1844	1844-1871
1871-1891	1891-1919
1919-1940	1940

"The periods of introversion thus averaged twenty-one years, those of extroversion twenty-seven years. Writing in 1951 Klingberg confidently rejected the possibility of the U.S. then adopting the 'Gibraltar' politics advocated by Hoover and Taft and predicted that the U.S. was 'probably capable of great world leadership for another decade or more.' Extroversion still had sixteen years to run. Klingberg also suggested, however, that further in the future it was logical 'to expect America to retreat, to some extent at least from so much world involvement, and perhaps to do so sometime in the 1960's.' He was, if anything, a little too unsure of his own theory, for sixteen years later, the swing of introversion came along right on schedule...

... The in-swing of the Klingberg Cycle is clearly a fact, and it is precisely this fact that caused the national trauma over the Vietnamese War. At an earlier point in the cycle such a war would not have caused so much commotion. But not even Lyndon Johnson could successfully buck Frank Klingberg."

Ellsberg: Professor Huntington says the Vietnam war has led to an unprecedented revulsion in the minds of the American public, essentially because of a cyclical change in American attitudes. If true, this would imply we are in for some twenty years of similar reaction against any sort of involvement, followed by some twenty years of acceptance of any sort of involvement.

This implication is made more specific by saying that the same sort of war waged earlier, with the same consequences, would not have evoked this reaction. I believe this is wrong. If we had taken the same action in Indochina in 1954 or in 1961 that we did in 1965, we would have become involved that much sooner in the same kind of war, with the same prospects, and, in turn, would have gotten very much the same reaction in the middle of the Klingberg cycle. Therefore, the notion of a cyclical change in American attitudes as the main explanation for the response is wrong. The revulsion is largely a response to this war: including among other things, the manner we got into it, the manner we have explained it, the manner we are conducting it, and perhaps above all, our evident lack of lasting progress or prospects of success.

Speaking personally, and frankly, I must say that Professor Huntington's analysis -- insofar as it reveals his perceptions of the war and of the public's reaction to it -- distresses me very much. However, I don't want to dwell on my reaction to his description of the Vietnam war, which I had the fortune to witness fairly close up, as a relatively "limited and undestructive" war. What I wish to explore here is the empirical question, when our government should anticipate widespread public reactions against such an involvement.

Huntington's dismissal of the point that it could be the war itself that led to revulsion is based on a comparison with Korea, in which he suggests that the relevant differences in the wars themselves should have led to greater acceptance of the Vietnam war than of the Korean war. Therefore, he concludes, the cause of the actual lesser acceptance could not be our acts in Vietnam.

But what is the relevant difference he considers? When we look closely, it is very simple: it is body count. In other words, the analysis here of the moral issue all comes down to the single dimension of body count. I would suggest that this is as inadequate a predictor of the public's feeling of moral revulsion as it is a predictor of progress in the war.

For one thing, the question of the perceived stakes at issue in the war is relevant. Specifically, the Vietnam war simply is not regarded as a war of self-defense, whereas Korea virtually was: especially early in the war, which was when most of the cifilian casualties were inflicted. In the summer of 1950, we had a vision of Western Europe being at stake, with satellite armies poised to profit from the example of successful aggression in Korea. This had, I suggest, great bearing on the acceptability of the infliction of damage on people who themselves were not threatening us.

Moreover, the specific operations in Korea that were causing the casulaties were regarded as effective and even essential there. These same operations such as bombing that is not in close support, Sir Robert Thompson tells us -- and I feel sure he is correct -- have little impact on VC strength; yet at the same time, by their social and psychological effects within Vietnam, they strongly favor the longer-run political prospects of the VC. Therefore, regrettably, we have the spectacle of non-combatant casualties being inflicted in Vietnam, and massive refugee movements imposed, by processes which qualified experts tell us are unnecessary, ineffective, and even counterproductive.

Above all else, you have the factor of perceived failure and the very low likelihood of real success in the future. Moral, as well as practical, issues will surely arise at the point when this is perceived, for everybody for whom they did not arise earlier. Here, of course, is the enormous difference from Korea.

It is simply not acceptable, in the eyes of many people, to kill as amny people as we are doing in Vietnam, or even a much smaller number, when theprocess of violence offers as little promise of success in any terms as it does there, and especially when the stakes for the

U.S. are no larger than they seem there. To put it simply, a great many people in the country believe that you have to have very good reasons for killing innocent people; and the reasons they now perceive for sustaining the kind of operations we are pursuing in Vietnam just do not appear to be good enough. There may be a trend in attitudes here, especially among youth; yet there would have been no lack of such people, making the same judgment, if they had been confronted with the same war ten years ago.

III. THE U.S. GOVERNMENT AS A SLOW LEARNER

> Richard Barnet: "The roots of the Vietnam failure lie more in the structure and organization of the national security bureaucracy than in the personality of the President or the idiosyncracies of the particular group of foundation executives, military commanders, Rhodes Scholars, and businessmen who have been the President's principal advisers during the escalation of the Vietnam commitment into the Vietnam War."

Ellsberg: There is no question the bureaucracy must bear substantial responsibility for our failure in Vietnam. The bureaucracy, of which I was formerly a part, finds it peculiarly difficult to learn from failure: in large part because, for both bureaucratic and political reasons, failure can be neither recognized nor admitted. But if one is to learn lessons at all from Vietnam, one must be prepared to draw lessons from failure, for that has been our dominant experience there. I am talking about the situation as it looks today and last year and that, of course, defines failure. Our experience to date there involves failures upon failures.

"Bureaucracy," I want it clearly understood -- more clearly than in Barnett's discussion -- includes here the participants at the highest levels of the United States government. I am really tempted to include as well the Establishment, from which many of the top cabinet people were drawn. The performance of this "bureaucracy" in connection with Vietnam policy has been very bad, so bad it is very hard to characterize it simply as an aberration or bad luck.

We could have foreseen that the enemy -- probably the most finely trained guerrilla organization in history -- would perform as well as

it did and that our bureaucracy and military would perform as inadequately as they did. Some people did foresee this. For example, Stanley Hoffmann attacked my defense of our expanded involvement on just these grounds in 1965, when, representing the Administration, I confronted him at a teach-in. Therefore, in this sense, it was foreseeable. But not to our "bureaucracy."

There was ignorance about the problems, about the area, about the people, about ourselves. But there is another related factor just as important: the fact that the ignorance persisted, that it diminished scarcely at all over time. Important U.S. decisions have been made on Vietnam since 1950, and especially since 1961. I participated in a small way in decisions in Washington in 1964-1965, and in Vietnam in 1965-67. I have now had occasion to study both 1961 and 1963 in great detail.

The bureaucracy was raising the same problems then -- starting in the earliest years -- that we raise today, though in a different context. And some of these problems have been understood clearly, then and now. Yet the actual performance of our system for exerting influence and for deciding about and operating in Vietnam reveals not only ignorance at every stage but also the persistence of ignorance, the inability of the system in this particular sphere to learn from a very long record of experience. I don't believe the bureaucracy is any smarter about this problem in 1968 than it was in 1965, or 1961, or 1954.

As a result of being in Vietnam, I became aware, over a long period, of some of the sources of willful ignorance, what one might call "anti-learning mechanisms" in the United States government. I think one can only appreciate this by viewing the performance up close. Newspaper readers can not really get it. You have to be close to the decision-making apparatus to know how inexcusable some of these things are, month after month and year after year. I draw from this not only a lesson about the limited ability of our system to learn and adapt, our inability, at least on some important occasions, to reduce our initial ignorance. I also draw a general policy indication, concerning

the prospects for U.S. intervention in areas and problems of which initially we know little.

The "limitations of power" many people are talking about are really, I think, identifiable in many cases as limitations due to ignorance and the inadequate ability of the system as it now exists to learn from experience and especially to learn from failure.

We have a tendency to deny failures or to disguise failures by a process of self-deceit. Now, this might be viable if we were not also troubled by a tendency to activist intervention in large parts of the world where we do not know much to start with.

I infer that we should be especially cautious about any policy that calls for activist intervention in there areas. There is no use jumping in, no matter how important the problems seem to be, with the objective of on-the-job training, because it just doesn't work. Moreover, however nice it might be in Huntington's framework to have a super-CIA to facilitate more appropriate political intervention in these parts of the world, we do not now have any agency adequate to this role, and we could not have it next year or, in my opinion, in five years, or even longer. Therefore, it seems to me, one lesson we should draw concerns situations we should stay away from.

IV. THE IMPACT OF NOT LEARNING

Leroy Wehrle: "But despite our limited knowledge, and the desirability of understanding ourselves and others more, we still have to get up each morning, say to ourselves we do not understand enough, and then go out and try to deal with the world. To say that because of the tragedy of Vietnam, we no longer should be interventionists or activists or whatever words you want to use, is to miss a larger meaning which the world thrusts at us. I think that the balance U.S. foreign policy has struck during the last twenty years is still the right one, refined perhaps by what we have learned and the lessons in the mislearnings of Vietnam...

"Finally, I would like to close on a point that has been a theme of this disucssion, namely, the mislessons of Vietnam, particularly to disagree with one of Mr. Ellsberg's lessons.

"We have all agreed there have been mistakes, and mistakes compounded, but Mr. Ellsberg generalizes from this to conclude

that we have an anti-learning process built into government and therefore that we should be more reticent in our foreign policy elsewhere because we fail to learn from our failures. Stated in this generalized form, quite apart from whether it is valid to Vietnam, I think this is nonsense. I can think of many counter-examples. For example, painfully, we turned around our policy in Iran. Because of the lessons of China, we have had a sensible policy regarding Taiwan, and the results have been fairly good on the social and economic but not on the political front. Korea is another example.

"The United States government, like all of us, makes mistakes, sometimes learns from them and sometimes doesn't. We should not take as a datum of policy that it cannot learn, because the implications of such a conclusion are severe."

Edwin Reischauer: "If we all came to these problems as children, with completely open minds, we would probably learn quickly. However, we do not examine them that way. We come to Asian problems, for example, with wrong conceptions. It therefore takes a long time to relearn.

"I don't think, in relation to Mr. Ellsberg's terms of willful ignorance, that we have to try to perpetuate ignorance. The human mind tends to operate in this way. It is human nature.

"With regard to Asia and what we have pointed out here, I am rather surprised that we have managed to learn within twenty years that we are on the wrong track. This is pretty good for man."

Ellsberg: Obviously a major lesson of Vietnam is that we must know ourselves better. My experience in Vietnam has led me to believe we do not know enough about at least one aspect of ourselves -- that is, the learning properties of our bureaucracy and government. Let me dismiss as a straw man, one caricature of my earlier remarks. Obviously, the issue is not that we cannot learn, or that we never learn, or that we never learn fast or effectively enough. The issue is that we often need to learn a great deal more and faster; now, even in the most urgent situations, our adaptive processes sometimes lead only to amazingly and disastrously slow and unreliable interpretations and changes.

That this is a simple point does not reduce its significance. Mr. Wohlstetter, in the Fifties, was very important in drawing implications for our strategic plans and posture from what seemed a

very simple perception -- that electronic messages take time to be communicated and can be interrupted by some physical phenomena. Now, it would not seem that this was a great physical discovery. However, at that time our strategic plans were formulated as if this were not the case, as if messages travelled instantaneously and were thoroughly reliable.

Similarly, the perception that organizations, in certain situations more than others, have bureaucratic, and not merely human, properties which involve peculiarly bureaucratic insensitivities, blindnesses or distorted incentives that delay learning, or slow up learning, or make learning uncertain: this perception is not as much in our consciousness for purposes of analysis and planning and policymaking as I think it should be.

It is especially important to try better to estimate the odds and the speeds of learning when one is involved in giving advice. Many of us in this room have been in the position time after time, of giving advice whose appropriateness was premised upon the United States government or that of another country <u>changing</u> itself fast and in important ways. I can easily name specific examples of advice in which the speed with which governmental change would occur was critical to the appropriateness of that advice. Yet in few cases did the advisors concern themselves with that issue and, if they did, they rarely give the right answer. Their advice, consequently, often led to very bad results. To give advice in the hope that all of one's own preferred tactics or instruments can and will in fact be adopted is often terribly unrealistic; and it can be dangerous and even irresponsible if we know that this is not the way it is going to be. It is very important in designing and giving advice, in other words, to ask oneself how that advice is likely to be carried out.

I want to illustrate generalization with a very narrow but important prediction with regard to Vietnam and elsewhere.

I think that at least one great failure probably still lies ahead of us in Vietnam. Saigon, to my mind, is unlikely to survive this year and, indeed, perhaps even unlikely to survivie the summer. I make

that prediction here because it illustrates my point.

Many people in the bureaucracy can see that this eventuality would be disastrous for us, whether you think in terms of negotiations or anything else. Saigon, of course, is preeminently the "oil spot," more and more, almost the only one; with a few other cities and towns, it is the home of the supporters of the GVN, people who have been driven to Saigon by what Huntington regards as our "modernizing instruments" in Vietnam, bombs and artillery. It is easy to see that, on any point of view, it is not in our interest to destroy Saigon. But I think it probably will be destroyed -- and by us -- because it is in the interest of the Viet Cong to move us to do so. And the Viet Cong understand us better, perhaps, than we understand ourselves, and they understand how difficult it is for us to change our habits and how unlikely such change is. I think we will not learn fast enough.

I would say that it is important to prevent our destroying Saigon, and that it can, in principle, be avoided. The President can give an order, and it could be effective. But it is essential in arriving at appropriate policies -- in this case, as in others -- to ask: Will he in fact give that order, and to what degree will it be effective?

My own judgment in this instance, right or wrong, is that the President can keep our bombers from bombing populated areas in cases of isolated Viet Cong incursions into Saigon. But in a desperate situation, where bombers appear the only way to save American lives and the American presence, the President probably would not, in the fact of the advice he will get from the military, resist the call for measures that would destroy Saigon -- perhaps all at once, perhaps district by district.

First, it is worth enormous resources to prevent the Viet Cong from getting into Saigon at all, in large numbers. This means a redeployment of our forces, which we have not yet carried out to the necessary extent, and probably won't.

Second, once we realize in a particular case that we are very unlikely to learn fast enough, we must conclude time is strongly against us; and our attitudes in negotiation should reflect this conclusion.

The longer we allow the fighting to go on, the more difficulty we will have, because the VC have gotten our number: they have an effective tactic to use against us, and sooner or later they are likely to use it. In fact, they have found a way to exploit our reflexes -- in Sir Robert's terms, a jujitsu technique. Thus, our bargaining position is likely to get worse over time, not better.

Finally, it is essential, I think, to study the governmental and military learning process itself to learn much more about its limits and how one can speed it up.

V. U.S. INTERVENTION, OCCUPATION, AND REFORM

Samuel Huntington: "A second problem concerns the effects of American efforts to promote social reforms. So long as American efforts remain relatively small and are limited to the carrot and the stick of economic assistance and its denial, the impact of these efforts on social change will be relatively small. Where the U.S. massively intervenes in a society, however, its effects on the promotion of social reform, economic change, and modernization are likely to be overwhelming and revolutionary. American liberals frequently think of U.S. involvement in the politics of another country as inherently biased on the side of the status quo. This is, however, only a half-truth. In fact, there would appear to be a direct correlation between the scope and direction of American involvement. The more extensive the American involvement in the politics of another country, the more progressive or reform-oriented is its impact on that country. In those countries which it has governed militarily or colonially the impact of the U.S. has generally tended to undermine and destroy the traditional order, promote social and economic equality, expand human welfare, and stimulate economic development. In the years since World War II, for instance, rapid and thoroughgoing land reforms have (with one exception) been carried out under two auspices: Communist revolution (China, Vietnam, Yugoslavia) and American military occupation (Japan, Korea, and, at a second remove, Taiwan). The only other country which has carried out a land reform as sweeping as these is Bolivia, and that was done by a revolutionary government financed by the United States.

The revolutionary and modernizing impact which a massive American presence has on a foreign country is in part the result of conscious desire to promote reform and in part simply the byproduct of the exposure of a traditional culture to the ways of an egalitarian, affluent, liberal, modern society. On the other hand, where the American presence

is relatively limited -- and in particular, of course, where the American governmental presence is limited -- the net effect of the American impact tends to be much more conservative, witness most of the states of Central America."

Ellsberg: I am very disturbed by several lessons Professor Huntington has drawn from experience. This, by the way, does not lead me at all to think one should avoid learning lessons; I think that is essential, and it is not at all too early that there be efforts such as the one we are on.

Professor Huntington has generalized that the more extensive the American involvement in the politics of another country, the more progressive is its impact on that country. He several times alludes to a possible relationship between intervention and reform.

Now, the first thing that strikes me about this proposition is that Vietnam itself provides a spectacular counter-example. The period of our intervention in Vietnam -- which includes the period from 1950 on, and especially from 1954 on -- cannot be described in general as a progressive or reform-oriented interval by any means.

One thing, perhaps, that might have misled Professor Huntington -- it has misled a lot of other people -- is the amount of talk there has been about reform, generally from lower-level staff members, and, occasionally, official pronouncements. When he refers to the stress on reform by people in State and CIA, he is mainly talking about the FSO's who accompany visitors to Vietnam. But this does not characterize very much of what their superiors have said, in official, internal policy statements and decisions, and it characterizes even less what we have effectively done.

Stress by the U.S. Government on reform in Vietnam has been virtually entirely verbal, and after the long period we have been in Vietnam it hasn't had much impact. Verbal stress, it turns out, does not create psychological stress in the minds of the people we are advising, or any real impulse for reform. We have obviously not been an effective influence for reform in Vietnam. Talking about land reform, or talking about anything else, has meant essentially

nothing.

In fact, if you look at examples that seem to support Huntington's case, they can be much more precisely defined. The critical factor is not presence but occupation. It is as simple as that. When we Americans occupy a militarily defeated country and are not plagued by a continuing resistance in the country, experience shows a considerably progressive and reform-oriented impact. But experience does not show whether those efforts would have survived a resistance movement. We have not been tested on that.

Incidentally, I know that the historical examples of U.S. occupation misled many people in the Administration in their predictions of the benign effects of a great American build-up in Vietnam. Many of them had had experience in military government in places like Korea, Japan or, Germany, and this led them to think of us as inevitably a force for reform. But lacking in Vietnam the responsibility we had in occupied countries for the long-term political and economic development of the country, we were in no sense effectively a force for reform. Therefore, to accept your proposition, Professor Huntington, would surely lead us greatly astray in countries where we do not propose fully to take responsibility.

> Samuel Huntington: "I disagree with you on the specifics of Vietnam and the nature of our impact. If you want to go back over the period since 1954, the more we have become involved, the more we have had precisely the sort of impact which the proposition states we will have.
>
> When you talk about occupation, that is precisely the point. This is an extreme case of American intervention. The logic of your argument seems to suggest that if we only did go in and take over Vietnam and run it the way Korea was run or Japan was run, we would have these effects. Here it seems to me you are focusing on an extreme case and building an argument for even more intervention."

Ellsberg: I certainly do not want to be misunderstood in my remarks. I was interpreting your proposition. I believe it is wrong to say that there is anything like a smooth function relating intervention and a progressive impact.

As we have increased our presence militarily, economically, politically and in every other way, we have, of course, demolished the society of Vietnam. From a very long term view, this is what is happening right now. Out of this ruin, perhaps, one might say some benefit may come, at great cost. However, in any case, we are perceived by the Vietnamese, correctly, as having first supported the French regime and secondly, the Diem regime; hardly progressive reform governments, whatever else they were. Finally, we are seen now as having saddled them with a deplorable military regime with essentially nothing to recommend it. This has been our impact, and it is creating intense anti-Americanism.

As for occupation, I am scarcely suggesting that is the solution. Conceivably it would haveled to more reform but that isn't the only criterion anyway. I do not believe it would be acceptable either in Vietnam or the United States, nor should it be.

Even with respect to the past, I would again ask whether the occupation of Japan or Germany could have had the reforming effect it did, had it been confronted with an ongoing insurgency.

VI. THE RELEVANCE OF POLITICAL REFORM

The references to Sir Robert Thompson's views below are to his oral remarks at the Conference and to recommendations scattered through his paper, "The Strategy of Intervention." The last part of the comments refer to the following passage:

> Sir Robert Thompson: "As part of the process of strengthening the government's assets, the question will arise as to just how far the major power can, in support of the aid program, bring political pressure to bear on the local government to undertake 'the needed reforms' expected of it. Great caution has to be exercised in this sphere to avoid creating either an issue where it did not exist or resentment by the local government being pressured to reform to an unacceptable pace. ...

"When a government is under pressure in time of war or insurgency and its main concern is the defense of the country, there will always be a tendency to hold firmly to the reins of power, to impose restrictions, to rely on the faithful and to ignore the 'nervous Nellies.' There will be few opportunities to press for 'the broadening of the administration.' It was interesting to watch this same process in action in the United States during 1967. One could almost hear the ghost of President Diem saying to President Johnson, "Mr. President, why don't you broaden the base of your administration?"

Ellsberg: It was very heartening to hear a very American "can do" attitude sounded by Sir Robert Thompson. His remarks could almost be paraphrased by the old Seabee slogan, "the difficult we do immediately, the impossible takes a little longer." But we must address ourselves to the question of whether time is really a solvent for all our problems.

All the measures Sir Robert has proposed would have been useful at the various times he proposed them, would have been worthwhile, would have strengthened the situation; they were, in fact, necessary. But, was there any likelihood of any of these being done in Vietnam? They were not in fact done, and the high odds that they would not be done should have become clear to us very early in the game in Vietnam. Regarding administrative strengthening, policing, intelligence improvements, and the other things he describes in looking at the strategic hamlet program, it is frequently said that the governing concepts were good but that they were carried out badly. But it was incumbent on us to ask in the beginning whether it was likely for them to be carried out, by a government like Diem's advised by Americans.

I believe there are only two ways that one could imagine these kinds of steps having been taken, and both ways, really, are ruled out by Sir Robert.

One would have been a comprehensive kind of American control. Certainly the success in Malaya reflected not British "advisors"

but British control. The British were in a position to run things in Malaya. Could the Americans from the beginning have exerted the same kind of control in South Vietnam? In any case, they were not inclined to intervene to that extent, for that purpose.

The other method would have been some kind of popular Vietnamese pressure. Mr. McDermott suggests we should help the people control their government. In principle, this is not an unthinkable sort of assistance. But Sir Robert deprecates this quite strongly.

I would argue that such political change in the relations between governed and governors has many positive implications for the success of the venture and the feasibility even of the administrative changes Sir Robert wants. Take administration as an example. Without detailed and informed pressure by the United States as the intervening power, is it imaginable that the Diem government would have achieved the kind of spontaneous strengthening of administration Sir Robert wants? In fact, even with that pressure there was a weakening of administration from 1954 to 1964 largely due to political factors.

Similarly, talent that could have been drawn back from France and other parts of the world was excluded from government either deliberately or because the persons involved would not associate themselves with a government of the nature of Diem's. The same is true of the governments after Diem. They have denied themselves this kind of administrative talent.

Moreover, even the best administration in the world would not have survived the fall of Diem, which was a direct result of defective political relationships between governed and governors. I think, therefore, that Sir Robert's sarcasm about U.S. talk and efforts to broaden Diem's regime is a little misplaced -- especially right now and especially in view of the analogy Sir Robert draws to the Johnson Administration. One almost has a feeling that his sarcastic comments, about how LBJ would have received a suggestion to broaden his government, were written before March 31, 1968.

The fact is that our own government was toppled at that point.

At least, it came as close to it as our system allows, and by very much the same kind of agitation that toppled Diem, and for many of the same reasons. The Congress having been bypassed in 1965 and inadequately consulted since then, the public having been ignored and misled, resentments were built up which created a situation where the President of this country was not able to get easily and safely to airports and auditoriums to campaign -- just as, as early as 1961, I observed that Diem needed large military escorts to get to the airport.

Failure has always been over-determined in Vietnam but, in the case of Diem, it happened at least in part because he disregarded the advice we had given him to do something to improve popular support for his regime.