



WAR & PEACE



THE VIET NAM PARALLELS

With each new escalation of U.S. military intervention in Central America, the similarities with U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia become more pronounced. The realization of these parallels has been a fundamental force behind widespread public opposition to further U.S. intervention in El Salvador and Nicaragua. The government has responded by pushing the chance for war to the brink. On this nineteenth anniversary of the Tonkin Incident which propelled the U.S. into combat with North Viet Nam, The Times Eagle publishes the following analysis of America's role in Viet Nam by a member of the U.S. Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador.

by Suzanne Ross

Short of the use of nuclear weapons, which was considered by Nixon at the height of U.S. involvement in 1969, the U.S. government used every possible means to win the war in Viet Nam. It spent a total of two hundred and seventy-four billion dollars (by 1969, thirty billion dollars per year), and dropped three times the tonnage of bombs on Viet Nam than had been dropped throughout World War II. It committed five hundred and forty thousand U.S. troops at the height of the war, in addition to one million U.S.-trained South Vietnamese troops. It risked domestic stability at home and lost international prestige.

Yet, stage after stage and strategy after strategy, the U.S. effort was defeated by the people of Viet Nam. In the end, the U.S. forces were routed from the country in complete disgrace, as the last U.S. advisors and embassy personnel scrambled to get onto the helicopters departing from the roof of the U.S. embassy in Saigon.

In the mid-1950s, after almost a century of colonial rule and decades of anti-colonial struggle by the Vietnamese, the French were defeated in Viet Nam. In the last two years of their rule, the French had received more than two billion dollars in military aid from the U.S. At the Geneva Conference in 1954, the war between the Viet Minh based in the north (led by Ho Chi Minh), and the French based in the south had formally ended. A "provisional military demarcation line" was established at the seventeenth parallel as a concession to the West, and internationally supervised elections were planned for 1956 to reunify the country under newly elected leadership.

The U.S., concerned about losing its economic and strategic interests in Southeast Asia, quickly moved to become the new colonial power in the



region. In total violation of the international Geneva agreement, the U.S. set out to create and fully arm a pro-U.S. regime in the South and to consolidate the "provisional" North-South division. It then refused, with its new "ally" to hold the planned elections because it seemed probable that they would lead to the reunification of Viet Nam under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh.

The U.S. installed Ngo Dinh Diem, a U.S. educated Catholic, closely allied with both the French and the rich Vietnamese feudalists, to head a poor and predominantly Buddhist country. With economic and military support from the U.S. and excessive CIA assistance, Diem promptly began a campaign to clean out the ex-anti-French resistance. Tens of thousands of people were assassinated and many more were placed in concentration camps. In response to six years of this campaign of repression, the National Liberation Front to South Viet Nam (NLF)* was formed in 1960. The NLF promoted national independence and the reunification of Viet Nam.

The U.S. charged that the North was responsible for the resistance, and gradually the myth

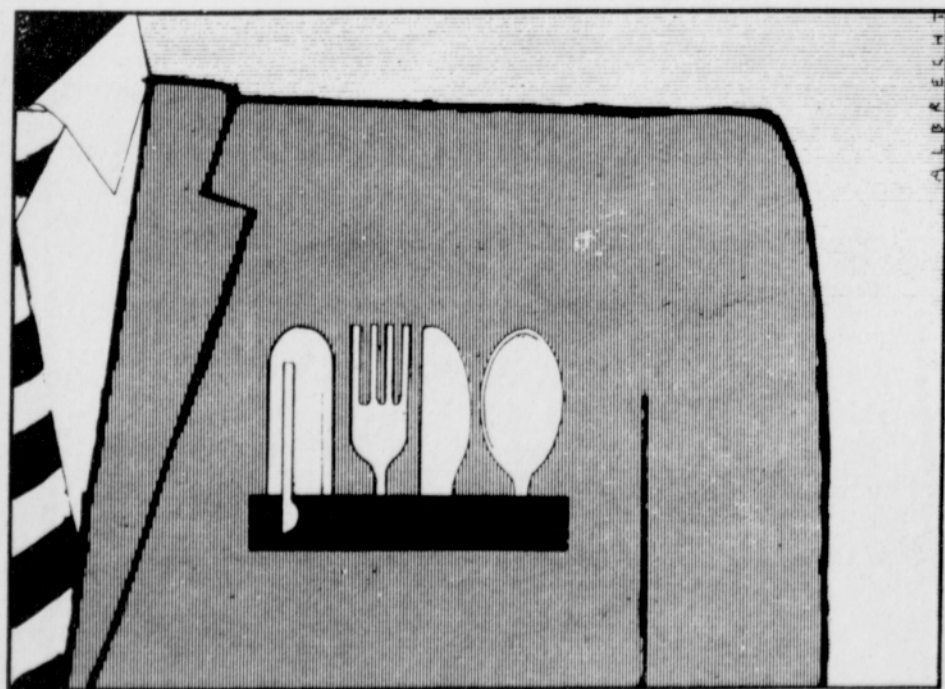
of North Viet Nam invading South Viet Nam became the official U.S. version of the war. China and the Soviet Union were charged with being behind the North Vietnamese. This view is still presented by the U.S. government, and bears a striking resemblance to the current charge that Cuba, Nicaragua and the Soviet Union are behind the people's liberation movement in El Salvador. With such a "communist menace" threatening the "freedom" of the South, the U.S. was "forced" to come to the defense of its created ally.

In reality, the U.S. was trying to defeat a legitimate people's insurgency, and hoping to then invade the North and bring it back under Western control. It is ironic that the U.S. presented the North Vietnamese as an alien force when in fact North and South Viet Nam were one country which the U.S. had divided. Coming from twelve thousand miles away, it was the U.S. rather than North Viet Nam that presented the "outside threat."

The Kennedy Administration, obsessed with developing a successful response to the "new" threat of guerrilla warfare, implemented a strategy of counter-insurgency in Viet Nam. The strategy was to herd the rural population into "strategic hamlets," to isolate the guerrilla fighters from their supporters, and then to exterminate them. Diem's army was increased to one hundred and seventy thousand and police forces were significantly increased. All were armed and trained by the U.S. to fight the counter-insurgency war. U.S. "advisors" were increased to direct the operations — by 1962 there were fifteen thousand such military advisors in the South and by 1964 this number had risen to twenty-five thousand, plus a U.S. operational command in Saigon. Toxic chemicals were provided to destroy vegetation in the NLF zones. Through this strategy, they expected to pacify the South within two years.

The strategy sounded plausible. The U.S. would show the Vietnamese in the South how to fight for their freedom. The problem was that freedom was hard to recognize in the Diem regime. Corruption, pro-Catholic bias in a Buddhist society, and the cruel forced relocation and pacification program designed and imposed by the U.S. characterized Diem's rule.

Initially hailed by U.S. officials as the "Churchill of Southeast Asia," as a "dedicated, responsible leader... who had wide support among the peasants of South Viet Nam... based on his reputation for honesty and justice," Diem was ultimately assassinated in 1963 with the collaboration of the U.S. because of his total lack of support among the population, especially the Buddhists, his unwillingness to institute token reforms, and his ineffectiveness, he was no longer useful within the U.S. scheme. Within twenty-three months there



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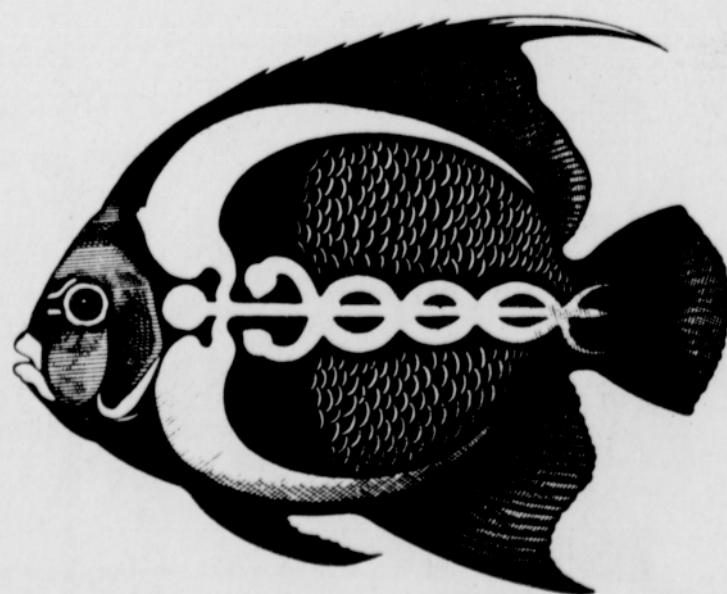
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