

JAYNE REPLIES IN DETAIL TO WATTLE

Edward Jayne
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Editors:

Throughout Johnson's term in office the American public has apparently grown increasingly mistrustful of our government's rhetoric about Vietnam. Even those who support the Johnson administration don't really seem to believe its rhetoric, with unquestioning credulity left only to the least sophisticated observers. It has been much to my surprise, then, to discover in the October 13 issue of *The Lumberjack* that Professor Wattle, a member of our faculty [at Humboldt State College] still apparently does put much unqualified trust in this rhetoric. He defends it vigorously against the student leaders who in an earlier letter had voiced criticism which I and many others have assumed to be only too obvious. The erroneous assumptions of Professor Wattle should be evident to most readers, but the composite mingling of these assumptions limits any reply to little more than a tentative suggestion of a different and hopefully more accurate viewpoint.

Probably the most important assumption of Professor Wattle is that American aid has been provided "at the request of and with the permission of the legally constituted government" of Vietnam to give it assistance in its fight for independence. Contrary to this assumption, the separation between North and South Vietnam may only be understood as a temporary measure. The Saigon government never had the authority to request foreign military aid, and its independence effort is both illegal and unpopular. This government was established in 1954 in accordance with the Geneva Agreements to administrate South Vietnam for no more than two years. At the end of this period, in 1956, a plebiscite election was supposed to be held to recombine the two halves of Vietnam under whatever party had won the majority of votes. As Eisenhower and others acknowledged, if South Vietnam and the United States had permitted this election, Ho Chi Minh would have won by an 80% majority. Instead, Diem accepted the advice of the State Department and refused even to engage in preliminary negotiations to arrange this election. His immediate excuse that the Geneva Agreements were no longer binding because they had already been broken by North Vietnam was beside the point; if anything, the International Control Commission reports indicate earlier and more frequent violations by South Vietnam. Diem's more fundamental rationalization was that he wasn't obliged to hold the plebiscite election because he had never accepted the Geneva Accords. However, this line of reasoning was proscribed by Article 27, which required him to assume the responsibility of the French government, which had signed the agreement, as soon as its authority was transferred to his own government.

In other words, the Saigon government had been established to terminate itself within two years. Instead, we installed Diem and tried to make South Vietnam a permanent entity against the will of the majority of the people. It must also be emphasized that articles 17, 18, and 19 of the Geneva Accords explicitly prohibited the Saigon government from recruiting foreign troops or establishing foreign bases. These articles also froze the legal number of American "advisors"

at a little over 800. On the other hand, they did not prohibit the North Vietnamese penetration of South Vietnam after 1956, if and when South Vietnamese voters chose to recombine Vietnam.

Professor Wattle claims that we are primarily fighting North Vietnamese troops and implies that the struggle is mainly one of repulsing their invasion. Quite the contrary, the war has been primarily and overwhelmingly a struggle of the South Vietnamese people against an illegal government. The National Liberation Front (called the “Viet Cong” in the American press) was organized in 1960 only after five years of brutal repression by the Diem regime. The Liberation Front was established as an indigenous coalition almost entirely independent of North Vietnamese influence, and in fact the communists of South Vietnam were even reluctant at first to join this coalition. To this day most of its civilian officers, including the president and five of the six vice presidents, are non-communists, a fact seldom mentioned in the American press. Until the spring of 1965, North Vietnam provided relatively little aid to the Liberation Front, and this was mostly in the form of supplies and a few advisors. This relative lack of troop commitment is clearly indicated by the State Department White Paper, published in February, 1954, as well as the I.F. Stone Reply to the White Paper.

In the spring of 1965, then, after the United States had begun its rapid troop buildup in South Vietnam, North Vietnam committed troops in battalion strength as a direct response to the American bombing of North Vietnam which had just begun. This timing is important to understand: the North Vietnamese troop commitment was made in retaliation to the bombing, not vice versa. The bombing came first, supposedly to force the North Vietnamese government to exert a restraining influence upon the National Liberation Front. Today, though North Vietnamese involvement is heavy and open, it still comprises only about a quarter of the Liberation Front’s total fighting strength. In contrast, a much larger percentage of Ky’s troop strength is provided by the United States, with American soldiers doing most of the fighting. The civilian government of the Liberation Front, which is generally acknowledged to provide most of its real authority, is still autonomous and much more independent of foreign influence than Ky’s regime.

Professor Wattle stresses the problem of Viet Cong atrocities and our commitment to protect “about 70,000 men and women who would be ruthlessly deprived of life.” Though the guerrillas have indeed committed atrocities, the concern of Professor Wattle seems somewhat paradoxical. Aside from the accidental mining and individual acts of atrocity which may always be expected in warfare, the number of people executed or assassinated by the National Liberation Front is surprisingly small. In a period of five years, fewer than 9,000 have been killed in this manner. Though deplorable in itself, this figure seems almost inconsequential compared to the number executed by the CIA-trained police of Diem, incinerated in our napalm attacks upon villages according to our scorched earth policy, and tortured to death in our unpublicized interrogation centers. In combat we boast of destroying upwards of a thousand people per week, most of whom, it has been repeatedly determined, are not hard core Viet Cong, but unlucky peasants who found themselves engulfed by search and destroy missions.

We have also relocated over a million “refugees” in camps whose barbed wire is turned inward, not outward. Supposedly these are refugees from Viet Cong atrocities, but in actuality they are either outright prisoners or refugees from our bombing raids. The fundamental purpose

of these camps is to deprive the Viet Cong of its popular base of support. A few are show-piece camps” where reporters and congressmen are taken, but most are incredibly filthy and wretched as described by Mary McCarthy in her recent eye-witness report. So to protect 70,000 people who would be “ruthlessly deprived of life,” we have been instrumental in destroying well upwards of 300,000 and incarcerating over a million others in concentration camps. This is indeed a paradoxical commitment to human values.

What makes this inverted humanism seem even more perverse is the simple fact that the National Liberation Front does not intend to initiate a vast program of vengeance as soon as it assumes power. Article II of its program specifically prohibits this kind of retaliation. The leadership of the Front is also sufficiently realistic to accept a coalition government for the interim period before reunification, which it conservatively estimates might last as long as twenty years. During this period and certainly during the earlier period of negotiations, those of the Ky regime who feel that their lives would be jeopardized as a result of their earlier roles will have plenty of time to join their families and friends abroad.

Professor Wattle is incredulous that anybody could “accuse our nation of being imperialistic.” According to his definition of imperialism, the “acquiring and building (of) colonies and dependencies,” we are not strictly speaking an imperialistic society. However, the American government and industry do practice a much more subtle and pervasive kind of imperialism that enables us to extract profits from countries without necessarily occupying them. It is estimated that roughly 64% of the world’s natural resources are controlled by American corporations and that 88% of American corporate profits comes from investments abroad. When uncooperative rulers like Mossadegh, Vargas, Arbenz, Bosch, and Jagan--to mention only five, (and twenty others may be named without much trouble)--when these try to put their national objectives above the profitability of American subsidies, they are usually swept aside as a direct result of American pressure. If pressure doesn’t work, then we send in the troops. Whatever this is called, it is imperialism, and our “client” states are all those “democratic” dictatorships that we protect with the example of Vietnam.

Professor Wattle draws our attention to Nazi Germany in order to warn us of North Vietnam’s expansionism. Unfortunately, the fascist analogy applies much more easily to ourselves than to North Vietnam. It is we who possess vast holdings abroad protected by military commitments throughout the world. It is we who forestall depression, just as Germany recovered from the Great Depression, by priming our economy with military-industrial spending that provides roughly 16% of corporate profits and 10% of total employment. It is we who like Hitler justify our aggression and atrocities as the necessary effort to thwart communism. We are not fascists--few claim this, though many are worried by current trends--but it is ludicrous to stretch history in order to flatter ourselves with the sunny side of the Munich analogy. If anything, we of all people should be shamed by this analogy into making a very fundamental reappraisal of our role in international affairs.

Finally, Professor Wattle suggests that if we lose Vietnam the dominoes will fall to threaten the rest of the world with communism. In other words, the example of Vietnam would encourage other liberation movements. To an extent this analysis is correct, though liberation movements presently seem inevitable throughout the underdeveloped world regardless of what

happens in Vietnam. The success or failure of any particular movement will not guarantee the success or failure of another. In fact, the only effective way to deal with insurgency would be to improve the living conditions of the people by implementing a genuine agrarian reform program and industrializing their economies. Meanwhile, our paradoxical effort to keep the world “free” by supporting dictatorships that repress liberties can only shock increasing numbers with the brutality of our methods and the hypocrisy of our rationale.

Probably the most useful part of Professor Wattle’s letter is his recommendation that we “study the short history of Vietnam.” I wish to second his motion, and suggest additionally that we should investigate the long history of Vietnam and the short and long history of other underdeveloped nations. My only warning is that the further one conducts such an investigation, the more dissatisfied he becomes, not only with the policy of our nation but also with its mythology.

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The following is a brief bibliography to help answer most of the questions concerning the previous letter: Burchette, Wilfred, *Vietnam: Inside Story of Guerrilla War*; Gettleman, Marvin, *Vietnam: History, Documents and Opinions*; Edward and Richard B. DuBoff, *American Vietnam Policy*; Morgenthau, Hans, *Vietnam and the United States*; Pike, Douglas, *Vietcong, Organization and Technique of NLF*; Raskin, Marcus G. and Bernard B. Fall, *The Vietnam Reader*; Schurmann, Franz et al., *The Politics of Escalation*; Scigliano, Robert, *South Vietnam: Nation Under Stress*; Snow, CP., *The Other Side of the River*.