

# Distorting History

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In this issue of Transaction/SOCIETY, not only has Colonel Summers posed all the wrong questions about the Vietnam War, he has also carried revisionist history of the war one step farther than it has ever before gone. Summers' contribution, in the guise of an essay on how the United States misunderstood the nature of the war, is one more attempt to rehabilitate the notion that the whole undertaking was morally legitimate. One finds the same theme that underlay official U.S. propaganda on the war: that it was in essence a North Vietnamese aggression against a neighboring state and that the United States was only a cop on the beat, carrying out its duty to defend the victim. What is new in Summers' essay, however, is an interpretation of the war's evolution that outstrips official propaganda even at its worst. As the starting point for his argument, he posits a war that no one familiar with the historical record could take seriously.

To accept Summers' interpretation, one must suspend all intellectual inquiry and pretend that historical fact is unnecessary and irrelevant to such weighty questions as the nature of the Vietnam War. He makes no effort to establish his "aggression from the North" thesis on the basis of documentation or specifics. His method of arguing the case exceeds all previous efforts in its sheer audacity. Summer suggests, for example, that he has the right to analyze North Vietnam's goals "using our own frame of reference" and simply ignoring Hanoi's own frame of reference. There is no possibility, he assures us, of establishing what Hanoi's attitudes, perceptions, and objectives were from objective evidence, since their "doctrinal manuals" are "not available" and since that documentation which is available primarily reflects North Vietnam's "declaratory strategy."

Hundreds, even thousands, of captured Vietnamese Communist internal documents—reflecting Hanoi's objectives, strategy and tactics, its perceptions of the United States, and its calculations during various phases of the war—have been available for years, along with

scholarly accounts based on those documents. This dodge, therefore, is so transparent that it ought to embarrass even the most hardened polemicist. Summers' "frame of reference," it turns out, consists in defining the character of the war by the way in which it ended. He calls this "judgment by results," a phrase apparently coined by Clausewitz (and thereby sanctified). Thus he argues that North Vietnamese tanks rumbling down the streets of Saigon on April 30, 1975, constitute proof that Hanoi had planned to conquer South Vietnam by military force from the start. Similarly, the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia in January 1979 "proves" that the Vietnamese had planned to take over Cambodia all along.

A moment's thought is sufficient to realize that "judgment by results" is utter nonsense. The fact that the Vietnamese Communists won the war with the help of tanks does not define the essential nature of the war any more than the fact that the Vietnamese forces surrounding Dien Bien Phu had Chinese advisers proves that they were Chinese stooges during the war against the French. By this same twisted logic one could just as easily prove that the real aim of the United States was to carry out the terror bombing of Hanoi, since that was America's last military act before withdrawing its troops. Or, for that matter, that the United States had planned to invade Cambodia ever since it first became involved in Indochina in 1950.

Summers himself appears to sense a flaw in his reasoning when he tries to distinguish between the nature of the First Indochina War ("revolutionary war") and the Second Indochina War ("aggression from the North") on the basis that the "forces that besieged Dien Bien Phu grew out of the guerrilla movement." Those troops were *not* guerrillas fighting with cast-off rifles and punji spikes but regular, main-force units of the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV). Yet Summers does not claim that the use of regular forces by the DRV in the climactic battle of the war invalidates his characterization of the war as "revolutionary" and

therefore, by implication, legitimate. By Summers' own admission, then, the nature of the war does *not* turn on the amount or composition of military force used by either side at the conclusion of the war, as "judgment by results" would suggest, but on some other set of criteria.

Those criteria, of course, are political criteria—the essential political facts that define who was the aggressor and who was the victim—and Summers does his best to avoid discussing them. To discuss political facts would mean having to deal with the genuine history of the conflict. Summers flattens all historical realities standing in the way of his argument as brutally as the Rome plows leveled the Vietnamese jungles and villages to clear them of unfriendly forces. Not for him is the task of distinguishing initiative from reaction, or of sorting out the continuities from the discontinuities in a conflict that began in 1945 and lasted three decades.

To define the nature of the Second Indochina War it is necessary to delve into its origins and delineate its key turning points. Again Summers acknowledges indirectly the feebleness of the "judgment by results" argument by adding a second thesis: the turning point that changed the nature of the war and in a single stroke defined the whole was the North Vietnamese decision in 1964 to send regular forces into the South.

Since this "turning point" thesis is the one attempt in Summers' polemic to use (alleged) historical fact as the basis for his justification of the war, it deserves careful attention. Here it is necessary to examine the nature of the war before the famous 1964 Hanoi decision. Again, Summers asserts without any attempt at documentation, that the Communist insurgency in the South was "a tactical screen masking North Vietnam's real objectives (the conquest of South Vietnam)." He believes, apparently, that the struggle waged by the National Liberation Front (NLF) from 1960 to 1964 had no political-military substance. For if the North Vietnamese entered the war in support of a powerful Southern revolutionary movement, then Summers' characterization of the Northern and Southern roles in the Vietnamese revolution collapses.

### The "Turning Point" Thesis

As anyone who has studied Communist movement in Vietnam knows, it is historically absurd to suggest that the NLF and its military arm, the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF), were nothing more than a "screen" for Hanoi's military plans for the South. Beginning in 1960, the NLF became the *de facto* government of thousands of villages in the Mekong Delta and had the clear allegiance of the majority of peasants. In most cases, the NLF took control of these villages without firing a shot, simply because the Diemist officials had no legitimacy in the eyes of the people. (The best popular account of how this happened is provided by the strongly anticommunist journalist Denis Warner, in his book *The Last Confucian*.)

U.S. intelligence would later estimate that the NLF

controlled some 2.5 million people by 1962. In 1963, the NLF was estimated by U.S. intelligence to have collected \$4.5 million in taxes from the South Vietnamese population—about 130 times what the Saigon government was collecting in direct taxes. By 1965, the NLF had an estimated 3.5 million people under its firm control, which meant a manpower pool of between 500,000 and 1 million. According to General Westmoreland, the revolutionary forces increased from 85,000 to 170,000 in 1964, while infiltrators (all Southerners) from the North numbered only 12,000 for the year.

In November 1964, PLAF regiments began to go on the offensive against the Army of South Vietnam (ARVN) in Central Vietnam. And in December the first PLAF main-force division destroyed an ARVN marine battalion and an ARVN ranger battalion. Thus, by the end of 1964, it appeared to the U.S. command that the PLAF was moving to the stage of main-force offensive warfare—a portentous change in the character of the war. Far from being a screen for a Northern invasion, then, the NLF and its military arm were rapidly acquiring the mass and momentum to defeat the Saigon government's army in a protracted war. This is the first strike against the "turning point" thesis. But equally important is the evidence available from reliable documents about the strategy of the Communist party leadership in the North vis-à-vis the South. From captured texts based on Central Committee resolutions, speeches by Political Bureau members, internal study documents, and other materials captured on the battlefield, a clear picture of North Vietnamese strategy emerges. It was a strategy that from 1959 to 1964 consistently sought to avoid committing North Vietnamese troops to the war in the South. These documents spell out a rationale for a war to be fought by Southerners from start to finish.

The reasoning behind Hanoi's strategy was simple: North Vietnam needed to concentrate on building up its economy, and it was necessary to avoid giving the United States a pretext for attacking the North. By skillfully waging a political and military struggle, the Communist leadership hoped it would be possible to defeat the Saigon government without a war that would involve the North directly. Even the December 1963 Central Committee decision referred to in passing by Summers was explicit in reaffirming the central point that the war should be fought by *Southerners* and that the North would only give material and moral support. As late as July 1964, General Vo Nguyen Giap was warning the South that "the liberation war in the South must rely mainly on the people there, although world support is important and very valuable." The "objective external conditions," Giap said, had to "rely on the subjective internal conditions to develop their effects," and he recalled that the Hanoi government had "always respected the provisions of the Geneva agreements." There is every reason to believe, therefore, that by mid-1964, Hanoi was still holding to its strategy of providing political guidance and material support to Southerners, but

keeping PAVN units (People's Army of Vietnam) out of the fighting.

If the PLAF was in the process of gaining the military initiative, and the Communist leadership had always been eager to confine the war to the South, why did Hanoi send regular units to the South later in the year? Was Hanoi suddenly seized by an inexplicable desire to provoke the United States, by altering "the entire thrust

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and scope of the conflict"? That is what Summers would have us believe. But even a casual perusal of the Pentagon Papers shows that this explanation ignores a central fact: during 1964 the United States sent a series of signals to Hanoi, actions as well as words, that it would take the war to North Vietnam if the Communist side were to escalate the war in the South, *regardless of whether the troops involved were Northerners or Southerners.*

The first major signal came out of a conversation between North Vietnamese Premier Pham Van Dong and Canadian diplomat J. Blair Seaborn in June 1964. Seaborn, under instructions from Washington, informed Dong that the United States intended to insure that the Saigon regime could govern without resistance throughout South Vietnam and that "U.S. patience was running thin." He warned Dong that if the conflict should escalate, "the greatest devastation would, of course, result for the DRV itself." Then came the U.S. air strikes against North Vietnam, a reprisal for attacks by North Vietnamese PT boats on U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin in early August. The strikes were followed immediately by another message from Seaborn—that the U.S. bombing "should add credibility" to the earlier warning and that "if the DRV persists in its present course, it can expect to continue to suffer the consequences." These warnings came against a background of U.S. moves to build up American air power in Thailand: six F-100s were deployed to Ta Khli in March 1964, followed by twelve more in August.

This series of dramatic signals was sufficient to convince Hanoi that the United States intended to attack the North, whether or not the PAVN entered the war. Premier Dong told Seaborn on August 13 that the United States had found it "necessary to carry the war to the North in order to find a way out of the impasse . . . in the South." Dong added that he expected further attacks and suggested that the North might be forced to react to that probability. He recalled that his government had "tried to avoid serious trouble"—meaning that Hanoi had pur-

posely avoided the involvement of its own army in the war in the South—but noted, "it becomes more difficult now because the war has been carried to our territory."

The effect on Hanoi's strategy of the U.S. threat to bomb North Vietnam is not difficult to calculate. It left the Communist leadership with a choice: either a long, slow effort to defeat the Saigon regime in the South, during which the weight of U.S. bombing against the North presumably would increase, or an effort to speed up the victory. Hanoi had tried the alternative of a diplomatic settlement, but to no avail. The United States had flatly rejected every proposal to reconvene the Geneva Conference on Indochina, including one made by Hanoi as late as August 3, 1964.

Hanoi had to take into account the possibility of a U.S. military intervention in the South, as well. If Washington was going to send troops to the South, Northern main-force units would be even more urgently needed in the war. The U.S. threat radically transformed Hanoi's options and led to a decision, probably in August 1964, to begin urgent war preparations and to send three regiments (4,500 men) to the South at once. The North Vietnamese were gambling that they could, by injecting a small portion of the PAVN, make it possible for the Southerners to smash the Saigon army *before* the United States had a chance to build up a massive force in South Vietnam.

The idea that Summers is peddling, therefore, neatly reverses the responsibility for changing the "thrust and scope" of the war. For during the 1960-64 period, both Hanoi and Washington had tacitly observed three limitations: no North Vietnamese troops in the South, no U.S. bombing of the North, no U.S. combat forces in the South (though this last had in fact been violated by U.S. pilots participating in combat operations since 1962). It was the U.S. determination to convince Hanoi that America would carry the war to the North, *not* in retaliation for a direct North Vietnamese intervention but in order to pressure Hanoi into calling off the war altogether, that triggered the North's decision to send PAVN combat units to the South. Interestingly, General Westmoreland claims in his memoirs to have opposed the bombing of the North on the grounds that it would have precisely this effect. No one in the U.S. government, however, seems to have had the foresight to anticipate that its signals to Hanoi about future bombing might have the same effect as actual bombing.

#### The Americanization of the War

The "turning point" thesis is thus a classical example of turning historical developments on their head in order to justify a policy. It was the United States that precipitated the alleged "turning point," not the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. But it is necessary to go further, for the real turning point in the war was the decision of the United States to send *its* troops to South Vietnam. The Americanization of the war had three major effects, which made it totally different from a war fought be-

tween Vietnamese political tendencies, whether Northern or Southern.

First, it made the conflict far more costly in Vietnamese lives and general destruction than any war among Vietnamese could possibly have been. Beginning in 1965, the U.S. Air Force turned much of South Vietnamese countryside, then controlled by the NLF, into a free-fire zone, and normal life there became impossible for its inhabitants. By 1970, only 10,000 of the 15,000 South Vietnamese hamlets officially listed in 1965 were still considered to be populated; the rest resided in areas that were listed officially as "depopulated" because of refugee movements. At least 2 million people fled from indiscriminate U.S. attacks on areas that were treated as enemy territory.

Second, by bringing the full weight of U.S. firepower to bear against the revolutionary forces, Washington left Hanoi no choice but to husband those forces, rely on primarily political-diplomatic struggle until the United States withdrew the bulk of its troops, and then strike with its main forces at the Saigon army in order to discredit Nixon's "Vietnamization." Instead of a prolonged war in which the revolutionary forces held the initiative to the end, as Communist leaders had envisioned

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in the South, the North Vietnamese recognized by late 1968 that they could not continue to throw their main-force units into battle only to be cut down by B-52 attacks, as they were in the May and August 1968 attacks. The air power advantage of the United States was so great that massive offensives were no longer possible for the PLAF. Hanoi, therefore, beginning in late 1968, withdrew much of the Communist main-force strength into Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam, avoided committing its forces to battle in greater than battalion strength, and waited until 1972 to stage its next major offensive. In short, Hanoi's strategy of going on the defensive for a long period, in order to build up for a major offensive timed for maximum military and political effect, was forced on it by the massive military force that the United States introduced into the conflict.

Third, the U.S. capacity to depopulate the NLF zone and kill enemy troops made it impossible for the NLF to support an army capable of defeating the United States and its client army. It was thus necessary for the North Vietnamese army to supply the manpower that finally overpowered the Saigon regime. The number of soldiers

killed and wounded on the Communist side between 1965 and 1971, according to official U.S. statistics, was an astonishing 1.77 million. Even if these figures were vastly exaggerated, as they probably were, they nonetheless suggest that the United States had the ability to kill or wound many times more people than could be replaced by the NLF zone's manpower pool, given the progressive depopulation and takeover of the countryside by U.S. and ARVN troops. To understand why it was predominantly North Vietnamese troops that captured Saigon in the 1975 offensive, one need only consider the impact of U.S. military operations on the South.

Summers ignores these basic facts, of course, in his attempt once again to turn history upside down and suggest that Southern revolutionary forces were actually destroyed as a result of intrigue by their Northern allies. Quoting General Weyand, Summers implies that Hanoi must have planned the 1968 Tet offensive in order to set up the entire Southern political-military apparatus for destruction. His casual suggestion that the Vietnamese Communists in the North and the South were really enemies rather than brothers only displays the author's ignorance of the Vietnamese Communist movement, in which regionalism was far less important than a shared sense of historical mission to regain Vietnamese independence. Moreover, it was not the loss of political-military cadres during the Tet offensive as such, but the inability of the Communist party and armed forces to replace them over the next few years that necessitated the growing reliance on Northerners after 1968. And that strategic decision by Hanoi, as noted above, cannot be understood except in the context of the unprecedented strategic military power that the United States was able to bring to bear against military and civilian targets alike in South Vietnam. Those North Vietnamese tanks which rolled down the streets of Saigon in 1975 were not the result of a strategic plan hatched in Hanoi at the start of the war; they were the consequence of a U.S. intervention that fundamentally changed the character of the war and forced North Vietnam to adjust its strategy.

Remaining is the issue of whether or not the Americanization of the war in the South was a decision triggered by a North Vietnamese invasion of the South. Again, Summers presents a carefully cleaned-up version of the history of that period: the North Vietnamese "launched a strategic offensive to conquer South Vietnam," while the "initial response" of the United States was "defensive, relying primarily on South Vietnamese ground forces and limited U.S. air support."

If one consults the record, it becomes apparent that Summers has again performed miracles of historical creativity. On March 8, 1965, the first two Marine battalion landing teams stormed ashore near Da Nang in full battle regalia, charged with the mission of providing base security as well as insurance against a possible collapse of the Saigon army in the region. By mid-April two more teams had arrived in South Vietnam, bringing the total U.S. combat strength to 33,000; these were given the

explicit mission of seeking out Communist troops within a fifty-mile radius of the air base. On April 20, the top national security officials of the Johnson administration met in Honolulu and agreed that the United States could deny victory to the Communists in the South by deploying another 50,000 U.S. troops and 5,250 additional third-country troops, to bring the total non-Vietnamese combat troops in the country to 90,000. There was no

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mention in their report of any plan by the North Vietnamese army to launch an offensive against the South. Indeed, their assumption, explicitly stated in McNamara's report of the meeting, was that the DRV would ultimately be forced to agree to a settlement "acceptable to us" because of the combination of their inability to defeat Saigon in the South and the "pain" from the bombing in the North.

In short, there is no evidence that the presence of a North Vietnamese regiment or regiments in the South in early 1965, much less any North Vietnamese "strategic offensive," was a factor in U.S. thinking about the deployment of combat troops to South Vietnam. On the contrary, the Johnson administration clearly was assuming that it could deploy large combat forces in South Vietnam and still keep the North Vietnamese out of the war by threatening to devastate the North. If there was a debate within the administration over North Vietnamese main-force units entering the South, it centered on whether U.S. combat troop deployments would trigger such a development. On April 2, 1965, CIA Director John McCone warned that putting more U.S. troops into South Vietnam would prompt the infiltration of PAVN units into the country. His warning is significant precisely because it indicates that, up to that time, high-level officials had not yet taken this possibility seriously. It was only on April 21 that the intelligence community issued a memorandum confirming the presence of one regiment of the PAVN's 325th Division in Kontum Province.

Thus far, this article has focused on the ground combat component of U.S. direct involvement in the war in the South. But U.S. air power was also committed to the war well before the North Vietnamese army participated in the fighting. Although I have been unable to find any indication in the Pentagon Papers or in any declassified documents of when the decision was made to unleash U.S. tactical air power in South Vietnam, press reports document that U.S. fighter planes were already carrying

out strikes against NLF villages on a massive scale in March 1965. By April, the United States was carrying out about 50 percent of the 4,000 sorties conducted each month against Communist targets. U.S. B-52s carried out the first strategic bombing raid against NLF base areas in the South in mid-June.

By May 21, before any North Vietnamese troops had been committed to battle, Washington had already decided to bring up U.S. combat strength in South Vietnam to 69,143 men. When the Communists' summer offensive against ARVN forces did get under way in May, it was carried out by indigenous PLAF units, not Northerners. The Southern PLAF, now comprising nine regiments, was able to attack the ARVN in all four corps areas. It inflicted serious defeats on the ARVN in engagements during the first weeks of the offensive, using only two of the nine regiments. Westmoreland reported that in the face of this PLAF offensive, ARVN "steadfastness under fire" was "coming into doubt."

The entry of the United States into the war, then, both in the air and on the ground, had nothing to do with a North Vietnamese "strategic offensive" against the South. Washington was responding to the threat from Southern revolutionary forces and hoping to alter the military balance in favor of Saigon by adding fresh U.S. combat troops to the equation.

Summers' attempt to rewrite history is only one of the many retrospective justifications of the war that we can look forward to in coming years. He has tried to hide the fact that the war was, in its essence, an American aggression that began long before 1965. The true history of the war is one of U.S. support for the French, a U.S. effort to keep the war going and prevent a negotiated settlement in 1954, threats to intervene to prevent the Vietnamese resistance from reunifying the country, U.S. subversion of the Geneva Agreement by taking over the French role in Vietnam and supporting Diem's noncompliance with that agreement, American encouragement of the use of force to resolve the political problems that noncompliance left, U.S. rejection of any diplomatic settlement that might have been an alternative to fifteen years of war, and prevention of any South Vietnamese regime from negotiating a settlement.

When the full record of the conflict and the U.S. role in it is known, such distortions of history as that contrived by Colonel Summers begin to look pale and shabby indeed. Such efforts should be condemned as dishonest and then discarded in our ongoing discussion of the meaning of the war. □

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