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Some of the Way with JFK

3. Le Duan Raises His Stake

In the course of 1961–62, the North Vietnamese government tilted away from Russia toward closer links with China, yet still neither power encouraged Hanoi to escalate. The communists felt enmeshed in a sufficiency of turmoil elsewhere—Cuba, Berlin, Albania, the Congo. The North’s domestic difficulties persisted: its population was increasing by half a million a year, yet grain production per head had fallen. China was taking a substantial proportion of the country’s rice output and three-quarters of its coal in return for a drip feed of cash. There was a massive migration of hungry peasants toward the cities but little for them to do when they got there; raw-material shortages caused factories to languish.

From May 1961 North Vietnam’s allowance of meat, which included cat and dog, fell to barely four ounces a week per person. That summer, hunger protesters set fire to rice stocks, amid clashes with troops, and in August burned down a bicycle factory. A bomb exploded in the city of Dong Anh. There was a local army mutiny, and on two occasions Hmong tribesmen attacked army convoys. South Vietnam and its US advisers encouraged such acts and ran a program of risibly unsuccessful commando stabs into the North. However, the dissent among Ho Chi Minh’s people was overwhelmingly spontaneous, driven by hunger and met with repression, which worked. By October 1961, a French diplomat reported that people had been reduced to “passive resignation.” Duong Van Mai said of the Northerners, “People were incredibly uninformed. It was as if they were sitting at the bottom of a well, seeing only a patch of sky. The communists had so many mechanisms of control.”

Le Duan now dominated Hanoi’s policy making, as he would continue to do for the next quarter century, though the world did not know this. In the Hollywood epic *El Cid*, the corpse of the eponymous Spanish medieval hero is strapped into the saddle to lead his army to one final victory. Something of the same was true of Ho Chi Minh. He was haunted by fears that Vietnam would become a new Korea, a devastated battlefield on which Americans and Chinese contested mastery. As his health declined and younger men grasped the initiative, he abdicated mastery and even influence on war making, but he remained an indispensable figurehead, commanding respect throughout much of the world. Ho and Prime Minister Pham Van Dong remained the public faces of North Vietnam’s leadership, while Le Duan was almost invisible. The Moscow-leaning Giap became the object of animosity from comrades who deplored his bloated personal staff and lust for celebrity. One called him “a show-off and braggart.” The armed forces’ former chief logistician at Dienbienphu hated his old commander and often complained about him to

Ho. Another senior general and cabinet minister, who was also a brother of Le Duc Tho, likened the veteran to an old barrel, growling, “The emptier a barrel, the louder it booms.”

Le Duan displayed skill and patience in conducting relations with the Soviets and Chinese. He liked to quote a Vietnamese version of the English proverb “When in Rome . . .”: “Visiting a pagoda, you must wear the robes of a Buddhist monk, and when you walk with a ghost, you must wear paper clothes.” He and his clique considered the Russians untrustworthy and weak, not least because they had blinked first in the Cuban missile crisis. Among those hard men, the Spartan ethic—a willingness to suffer in pursuit of a high purpose—reigned supreme. Le Duan deplored the need to travel repeatedly to Beijing as a suppliant, and to endure its snubs. One of his acolytes claimed that on a 1961 visit Zhou Enlai asked him, “Why are you people conducting armed struggle in South Vietnam? . . . If the war expands into the North, I am telling you now that China will not send troops to help you fight the Americans. . . . You will be on your own, and have to take the consequences.”

Le Duan sometimes referred to Mao as “that bastard,” and when China’s chairman once fantasized aloud before a Hanoi delegation about sending his People’s Liberation Army to liberate the South, he awakened every visceral Vietnamese fear of their neighbor’s imperialistic inclinations. While Le Duan leaned toward China, he forswore direct criticism of the Soviet Union, because Hanoi needed its more sophisticated weapons and industrial plant. He often made cynical remarks about the parsimony of Chinese aid, professing to believe that Beijing regarded the Vietnamese revolution as “a bargaining chip in negotiations between China and the US.”

In 1961–62 the North Vietnamese saw risks in pushing a new US president too hard: though they increased their commitment in the South, they remained anxious to avoid provoking the Americans to dispatch combat troops. They agonized about whether to enter negotiations and urged their Southern comrades through COSVN to focus on the political struggle. In one of Le Duan’s “letters to the South,” dated February 7, 1961, he acknowledged that “we are weaker than the enemy.” It was important, he said, to emphasize the autonomy of the National Liberation Front and not allow it to be branded as Hanoi’s tool. It was a contradiction of this period that while North Vietnam gave its Southern comrades far less support than they wanted, on the international stage its leaders’ rhetoric became ever more bellicose. Le Duan was bent upon establishing his credentials as a standard-bearer for worldwide revolution. His stridency antagonized India, to name but one country, which no longer viewed North Vietnam as a fellow crusader against imperialist oppression, but instead as a menace to regional stability.

In 1962, Hanoi at last authorized large numbers of “returnees”—Vietminh who had gone North in 1954—to head South, where Communist Party membership was once more resurgent. Everywhere the NLF held sway, its cadres labored to change the habits of centuries. Education programs challenged Vietnamese fatalism—and the subordination of women. When couples married, the village Party secretary often supplanted the old matchmaker. In primary schools, children were invited to address such problems in arithmetic as: “There were fifty soldiers in a government post. We attacked it and killed twenty of them. How many were left?” An occasional nervous voice dared to inquire when the NLF or the Communist Party would provide insecticide, loans, pumps, tractors, and animal breeding advice such as the Saigon regime offered. Cadres assured peasants that all these good things would descend from the North as soon as the revolution triumphed.

Until 1963 the Vietcong's main sources of arms were captures from government forces. At the end of 1961, there were reckoned to be only twenty-three thousand serviceable weapons in guerrilla hands. Assassinations required little firepower, however. Between 1957 and 1960, a credible estimate has suggested, 1,700 Saigon village and provincial officials were murdered. Another 1,300 were killed in 1961. Beyond the usual eliminations of village chiefs and suchlike, there were high-profile victims, such as a Southern colonel—Saigon's senior liaison officer with the ICC—snatched and tortured to death. Such killings peaked at 2,000 in 1963, then fell to 500 the next year because the communists had liquidated most of their accessible local foes. Surviving officials and landlords took care not to place themselves in harm's way, meaning that—much to the detriment of Saigon's authority—they physically distanced themselves from the peasantry, taking refuge in towns and cities. The NLF appropriated the lands of those who fled, presenting them to friends of the revolution, who thus found themselves with a tangible stake in its success.

Throughout the war, American soldiers veered between contempt for the “dinks” and “gooks” as a primitive enemy and an exaggerated belief in their superhuman skills and powers of endurance. Grunts recalled the old Wild West story about a cavalryman who rode a horse a hundred miles in pursuit of an Apache and then, when it collapsed, shifted his saddle to another animal and kept chasing; meanwhile the Apache doubled back, revived the foundered mount, rode it a further hundred miles, then ate it. In reality, the Vietcong's performance was uneven and sometimes outright clumsy, its units as vulnerable to human frailties as any army in the world. Nam Kinh, a local commander in the Delta respected as a tactician but also notoriously harsh, was shot in the back by one of his own men whom he had forbidden to marry an attractive local widow. Thanh Hai—“Blue Ocean”—a landlord's son aged around thirty, was one of the most popular VC commanders, both for his military skill and his human weaknesses. Hai was repeatedly demoted for drinking and womanizing, the latter exemplified by his climbing under the mosquito net of a young conscript's wife.

One fighter spoke for many when he complained about interminable indoctrination sessions: “Talking to me about political matters is like playing a guitar to a water buffalo.” Some liked propaganda fairy tales, however. A unit in Long An Province was led by a woman named Kim Loan, whose husband had been killed by government troops. She became a local folk heroine, imbued with supposedly mystical powers. On one occasion she killed a policeman who tried to arrest her while shopping. On another she fled through the back door of a beauty parlor, and when soldiers scoured a nearby hamlet for her, she climbed a tree, changed into a bird, and flew. Frank Scotton challenged the old man who told him that story, saying, “You can't really believe that?” The Vietnamese smiled and responded that while he couldn't know for sure, “She got away, didn't she?”

Savagery remained the communists' principal weapon. The Vietcong once entered a village in Lai Cay, denounced twenty inhabitants of both sexes as government spies, beheaded them, and threw the bodies in the street, each with a scrap of paper attached listing their alleged crimes. Elsewhere a hamlet chief was tied to a stake and disemboweled in front of the assembled villagers; his pregnant wife was eviscerated, their children beheaded. Such atrocities were artistically crafted to persuade peasants that the price of resistance to the revolution was much worse than mere death.

Brutality was not confined to one side, of course. Doug Ramsey conducted a survey among students in Long An Province and found that between a quarter and half had lost relations to the

activities of Saigon's security forces. In the course of 1962–63, government troops killed 150 inhabitants of a single village in the Mekong Delta. Of these, an estimated 60 were associated with the NLF, but the rest were not. Among thousands of political prisoners held in appalling conditions in South Vietnam's jails and camps, some in a wing of the Saigon Zoo, there were many innocents. Of legal processes, there were none.

Though urban areas remained firmly under government control, in the countryside the guerrilla struggle seesawed, with control of villages and provinces frequently changing hands. Saigon acquired an arsenal of new weapons and equipment, and sometimes used these effectively. In late August 1962, guided by a defector, Southern troops overran an NLF training base at My Phuoc Tay, killing 150 cadres and trainees; surviving recruits fled back to their villages. American helicopters dramatically increased ARVN tactical mobility, so that they ranged into rural areas where the communists had for years held unchallenged sway. But capability and will were not the same thing: many South Vietnamese units declined to patrol where they might be ambushed and flinched from pressing firefights. In 1963 the Vietcong began to receive arms shipped in quantity from North Vietnam, often landed from the sea, especially in the Mekong Delta (including some recoilless rifles and mortars).

In cities, cadres labored to prepare the masses for a popular uprising. Children were often used to toss grenades into cafés and markets. Government intelligence remained poor, and communist activists were skilled in concealing their identities. As a VC courier, ten-year-old Truong Mealy was sometimes sent into a town to meet a code-named figure in a restaurant, clutching half a banknote to identify himself to a contact bearing the other half. If he or others of his kind were caught, their knowledge was confined to the first name of their Party teacher. Only senior NLF cadres knew the names of province chiefs.

The tempo of the war was rising. After two years in which the impetus of the armed struggle had come chiefly from Southern hostility to the Saigon government, Hanoi's influence and resources were becoming ever more conspicuous. Northern leaders scented rotting flesh, a stench of terminal decay, drifting upcountry from Saigon's presidential palace. They had become impatient to expedite funerary arrangements for the Diem regime. So, too, were important people in Washington.