WHAT WE CAN DO TO END

BY SENATOR ROBERT F. KENNEDY

The bombs fall. The mine erupts. A sniper scores. More widows, more orphans, more anguish. Men fight and die in jungles and fields half a world away. The foe is obdurate, the goals vague, the alternatives few: vanquish, negotiate, get out. Amid the debate and the dissension, an informed, concerned official authors a possible solution.

THE AGONY OF VIETNAM

IN THE VIETNAM CHAPTER of his book To Seek A Newer World, *from which the following article is excerpted, Robert F. Kennedy calls for negotiations as the only possible way out of the agony of Vietnam. Successive governments of South Vietnam have failed to win the allegiance of the people, in his view, and are not likely to. This, he adds, is because they have been and are "largely made up of, or allied with, a privileged class to whom it seems that the war is not worth winning if the price is the sacrifice of their land, wealth and power." Instead of land reform, long and universally regarded as an essential first step, the peasants are saddled with absentee landlordism, the Senator says. Instead of a government responsive to the needs and aspirations of the people, there is corruption and cronyism. Instead of an army that protects and assists the populace, South Vietnam has a military force that rarely fights, except for certain elite units, and that will suffer a ten percent desertion rate this year—more men than we will add to our forces there in 1967.*

Meanwhile, Senator Kennedy observes, despite the massive American effort to crush them, the Vietcong continue to grow in strength. He argues that although 227,000 Vietcong deaths have been claimed through August, 1967, "estimated Vietcong forces have risen from a maximum of 115,000 in 1965 to a minimum of over 250,000 in 1967, all by the count of our own command in Vietnam." What must be comprehended, he says, is that although the Vietcong are Communists, they also are Vietnamese nationalists, heirs of the Vietminh who defeated France and won independence with Ho Chi Minh as their leader and symbol. Though they employ brutal terror, he says, their basic appeal is political: They are a disciplined organization built around the grievances and dreams of the people. He cites Cyprus, Algeria and Vietnam itself as evidence that military force alone, no matter how superior, cannot defeat such guerrillas. "Foreign intervention cannot provide a substitute where a national will is lacking," he says, and yet the United States finds itself bearing the burden of major combat, unable to arouse the Saigon regime to general mobilization, sustaining casualties in the first months of 1967 at a higher rate than South Vietnamese draft calls, sending more men, dropping more bombs, spending more money to support the commitment already made.

Of the September 3 elections in Vietnam, Kennedy says: "With all the advantages of incumbency, with the support and votes of the armed forces, with their strongest rivals excluded from the contest, running against candidates who themselves did not represent social change or identification with the peasantry—with all this, the military ticket could still win only 34 percent of the vote of three-fifths of the nation."

Here are Senator Kennedy's views on where we go from here:

ALTHOUGH THE WORLD'S IMPERFECTIONS may call forth the acts of war, righteousness cannot obscure the agony and pain those acts bring to a single child. The Vietnamese war is an event of historic moment, summoning the power and concern of many nations. But it is also the vacant moment of amazed fear as a mother and child watch death by fire fall from the improbable machine sent by a country they barely comprehend. It is the sudden terror of the official or the hamlet militiaman absorbed in the work of his village as he realizes the assassin is taking his life. It is the refugees wandering homeless from villages now obliterated, leaving behind only those who did not live to flee. It is the young men, Vietnamese and American, who in an instant sense the night of death destroying yesterday's promise of family and land and home. It is a country where young men have never lived a day in peace and where families have never known a time when it was not necessary to be afraid. It is a land deafened by the unending crescendo of violence, hatred and savage fury, where the absorbing goal for millions is not to live well or to improve their lives but simply to survive. To them, peace is not an abstract term describing one of those infrequent intervals when men are not killing each other. It is a day without terror and the fall of bombs. It is a family and the familiar life of their village. It is food and a school and life itself.

All we say and all we do must be informed by our awareness that this horror is partly our responsibility; not just a nation's responsibility but yours and mine. It is we who live in abundance and send our young men out to die. It is our chemicals that scorch the children and our bombs that level the villages. We are all participants. To know this, to feel the burden of this responsibility, is not to ignore important interests nor to forget that freedom and security must sometimes be paid for in blood. Still, even though we must know as a nation what it is necessary to do, we must also feel as men the anguish of what it is we are doing.

Responsibility for our present difficulties in Vietnam is primarily Vietnamese, not American, although it involves us and is shared by us. It does not belong to any single man or any one administration. Many are agreed that Vietnam has become a tragic involvement; there is disagreement on where we went wrong. Senators Richard Russell and John Stennis, among the most articulate proponents of a strong military defense, warned President Eisenhower against sending the first advisers in 1954. Others opposed, or now criticize, President Kennedy's buildup of the advisory force. Some fault the decision to commit American troops to combat, or to bomb the North. However the case may be, I can testify—as one who was involved for three years in the effort and decisions in Vietnam—that if fault is to be found or responsibility assessed, there is enough to go round for all, including myself; and this I freely acknowledge. We should now neither curse the past nor praise it, but seek, from what we have learned, some guidance for future policy in Vietnam and elsewhere.

There are three possible routes before us: the pursuit of military victory, a negotiated settlement, or withdrawal.

Withdrawal is now impossible. American intervention has created its own reality. All the years of war have profoundly affected our friends and our adversaries alike, in ways we cannot measure and perhaps cannot know. Moreover, tens of thousands of individual Vietnamese have staked their lives and fortunes on our presence and protection, and cannot suddenly be abandoned to the forcible conquest of a minority.

Beyond this is the more general question of the American commitment and the effect of withdrawal on our position around the world. Without doubt, the so-called "domino theory," by itself, is a vast oversimplification of international politics. In Asia, China is the biggest of all possible dominoes; yet its fall to the Communists in 1949 did not cause Communist take-overs in its neighbors (though it participated in the Korean War and aided the cause of the Vietminh rebellion already under way). Burma, which refused military and economic assistance from the United States, repressed two Communist insurgencies without interference or disturbance by the Chinese. The Cuban domino did not lead, for all Castro's efforts, to Communist take-overs elsewhere in Latin America. Vietnam's neighbors do not share its combination of government weakness and nationalist revolutionary strength; if they did, surely we would expect that they would long ago have erupted in insurgency while the United States is so heavily engaged in Vietnam.

If the domino theory is an unsatisfactory metaphor, still it contains a grain of truth. A great power does not cease to be that because it suffers a defeat peripheral to its central interests. The Soviet Union is still a great power, notwithstanding the collapse of its Cuban adventure in 1962. But in some degree, the aftermath of Cuba was a perceptible lessening of Soviet prestige and ability to influence events in many parts of the world. So, I believe, would defeat or precipitous withdrawal in Vietnam damage us. We would not suddenly collapse; Communist fleets would not appear in the harbor of Honolulu and San Francisco Bay. But there would be serious effects: increased Communist influence—at least—especially in Southeast Asia itself. That is not to say, however, that Chinese expansion would thereby be strengthened. North Vietnam has its own interests and dynamism, and the most constant thread of Vietnamese history and present nationalism seems to be hatred and fear of China.

Beyond Asia, in other nations that have ordered their security in relation to American commitments, a sudden unilateral withdrawal would raise doubts about the reliability of the United States. Our investment in Vietnam, not only in lives and resources but also in the public pledges of Presidents and leaders, is immense. It may be, as some say, that the investment is grossly disproportionate to the area's strategic value, or to any ends it may conceivably accomplish. But it has been made. Simply to surrender it, to cancel the pledges and write off the lives, must raise serious questions about what other investments, pledges and interests

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might be similarly written off in the face of danger or inconvenience—though other nations will not cease to defend themselves, or surrender themselves to our adversaries, simply because they do not regard us as reliable protectors.

These are the main arguments against withdrawal. But these arguments do not in any way support a policy of continuing the present course of conflict, or continuing it at its present level, or in the same way. Still less do they support a search for nonexistent ways to military victory.

We are now steadily widening the war in order, we are told, to increase the costs to Hanoi. Yet let us not omit our own costs from the war's account. The mounting devastation of South Vietnam is more and more eroding the fabric of that society, making its ultimate reconstruction more remote and difficult. Yet lasting peace depends upon the strength of the nation we leave behind. The war has also made far more difficult the hopeful pursuit of fresh understanding and diminishing tension between the two great nuclear powers: the United States and the Soviet Union.

"The war has divided Americans in ways whose effects we may feel for years to come."

THE WAR HAS ESTRANGED and alienated us from our closest friends in the Western Alliance. Not one has seen fit to aid us in Vietnam; they continue to trade with both North Vietnam and China; and some European church organizations are extending assistance to North as well as South Vietnam—an action unthinkable in Korea or World War II. I found in Europe, among men and nations who wish only good for the United States, deep anxiety and fundamental disagreement with our policy; we were, they felt, becoming dangerously irrelevant. Beyond Europe, in the Near East, Latin America, Africa and the Indian subcontinent, the diversion of our attention, resources and energies has seriously limited our capacity to affect the course of events and protect far more important national interests. The war is also diverting resources that might have been used to help eliminate American poverty, improve the education of our children, enhance the quality of our national life—perhaps even to save the nation from internal violence and chaos. The war has divided Americans from each other, and some from their Government, in ways whose effects we may feel for years to come.

Thus, there is another domino theory, another kind of momentum to this war. The mounting cost is an increasing deterrent to action elsewhere. Though portrayed as a necessary proof of our will and ability to "keep our commitments," the war in Vietnam is very likely to have the opposite effect. In the Congress, liberals and conservatives alike have firmly stated their conviction that the United States should never again engage in an effort like Vietnam. Some would have us prove in Vietnam that "wars of national liberation cannot succeed." But the longer the conflict goes on, the more likely we are to "prove" that we will not oppose them in the future. Certainly the sight of the world's most powerful nation so frustrated by one of the weakest of nations must hearten believers in revolutionary war and the efficacy of Communist tactics.

Growing awareness of these realities has led some to call for a quicker end to the war through application of greater military power: the pursuit of total military victory. But this is a phantom. Military victory would require that we crush both our adversary's strength and his will to continue the battle; that the forces from the North be compelled to withdraw beyond the border; that much of Vietnam be destroyed and its people killed; that we continue to occupy South Vietnam as long as our presence is required to ensure that hostilities, including insurgency, will not be resumed. This will be a very long time indeed.

Despite the brave and dedicated efforts of American forces, enemy forces continue to grow. Increasing support from the Soviet Union and China has given the Communist forces a new range of sophisticated and destructive weapons. Security in the countryside depends, perhaps more than ever, on the physical presence of American troops. The South Vietnamese Army assumes less and less of the burden, requiring us to run harder just to prevent further deterioration. Yet our resources of planes, pilots and trained combat leaders are already under serious strain everywhere in the world.

These facts tell us that the pursuit of victory would require a massive new expansion of the war. It would mean rapidly increasing commitments of American forces—to a million or more—the call-up of reserves, and something close to general mobilization. It would mean a growing risk of widening war with China, even with the Soviet Union. It would lead, indeed already has led, thoughtless people to advocate the use of nuclear weapons. And it would involve all these things—commitment, risk and spreading destruction—in pursuit of a goal that is at best uncertain and at worst unattainable.

There is a tendency, born of impatience and frustration, to assume that a freer exercise of our great power, especially the destructive power of our Air Force, could quickly end the war. But the claims of airmen to omnipotent destruction have not proven sound in the past. By 1944, though Berlin had lost two-thirds of its homes and over a million Germans had been killed or wounded by Allied bombing, war production was three times as great as in 1941. North Vietnam, moreover, is not an industrial but a peasant society, not seriously vulnerable to air attack. The port of Haiphong, says the Secretary of Defense, is a "convenience rather than a necessity" for imports and could easily be replaced by overland supply routes. Destroying the capital of Hanoi would mean little to an enemy who defeated the French without holding a single major city. (I visited Hanoi when the French held it. It was clear that holding the city meant nothing while the Vietminh were slowly winning the countryside.) Bombing the cities, or the dikes that keep the Red River Delta from flooding, would amount to the deliberate destruction of the North Vietnamese people: an action out of all proportion to the threat they pose to us and certain to provoke the justified condemnation of the world.

If the bombing cannot destroy North Vietnam's *capacity* to fight, can it destroy its *will* to continue? In Ethiopia, Mussolini could not force Haile Selassie to surrender with bombing. Bombing did not have that effect on Great Britain or on Germany. On the other hand, bombing seems to have played a part in inducing Italy to surrender in World War II. The Tokyo fire raids and the use of the atomic bomb certainly were a major factor in the Japanese surrender. It is impossible to say that bombing will or will not bring a country to terms. The Secretary of Defense, as late as August, 1967, told the Senate that "I have seen no evidence in any of the many intelligence reports that would lead me to believe that a less selective [that is, intensified] bombing campaign would change the resolve of North Vietnam's leaders or deprive them of the support of the North Vietnamese people. . . . There is also nothing in the past reaction of the North Vietnamese leaders that would provide any confidence that they can be bombed to the negotiating table."

We do know that escalation of the bombing as a solution to this war has been a terrible and dangerous illusion. Escalation is not our sole prerogative, but a mutual activity. North Vietnam cannot precisely duplicate our escalations. But it can match our escalation where it is relatively strong: on the ground in South Vietnam. When we began bombing the North, in February of 1965, there was one battalion of North Vietnamese regulars confirmed as fighting in South Vietnam, and our combat deaths numbered in the hundreds. As we introduced ground combat forces, the North Vietnamese also increased their commitment, and the Vietcong stepped up their recruitment—and by the end of 1966, over 6,000 Americans had died. In 1967, both on the ground and in the air, our escalation has been matched by our enemies' acquisition of whole families of new weapons. Our combat deaths were greater in the first six months of 1967 than in all the six previous years combined.

This may be only a foretaste of what is to come. Clearly, the Soviet Union feels that it must maintain its support of the North Vietnamese effort as long as the fighting continues. Neither China nor the Soviet Union can accept the defeat or destruction of North Vietnam; just as our Government feels it cannot abandon the South Vietnamese. The Soviet Union can maintain this support at little cost to itself, meanwhile helping to seriously sap the strength of the United States. We can extend our bombing—and the Soviets can give North Vietnam rocket-firing patrol boats or ground-to-ground missiles. We can introduce more troops—and the North Vietnamese can match them with another segment of their regular army, only one-fifth of which has thus far been committed to combat.

We can invade the North—and thereby engage another quarter of a million of the enemy in combat; somewhat as if a man afflicted with one migraine were to request another head in which to have a second. We can settle into a "war of attrition" on the Asian mainland, where our adversary has a strategic reserve of 700 million Chinese. In 1964, a former chief of the Strategic Air Command told us that an ultimatum, coupled with the bombing of selected military depots, would bring Vietnam to its knees "within a few days": another of the promises of easy and imminent victory that have not ceased since the French began them in 1946. It is perhaps too much to expect that these promises will no longer be made. It would be incredible if they would any longer be believed.

The third alternative is a negotiated settlement—as we have known

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for more than two years, the only satisfactory solution to the war. This course is our stated Government policy. This is the course that I favor. Only negotiations could allow us to end the fighting without precipitate withdrawal, to avoid the progressive destruction and weakening of South Vietnam, and end the drain on our own energies and resources, without great damage to our position in Asia and the world.

Throughout 1966, the chances for such negotiations were present. They reached their height in the winter of 1966-67. At that point, with a false scent of victory leading us on, the United States cast away what may well have been the last best chance to go to the negotiating table, on terms we clearly would have accepted before. The months of war that have followed have been as destructive, to our own forces and to North Vietnam, as all the years of war before 1967. The damage, and hardening attitudes, may make a negotiated peace impossible for some time to come. An effort for negotiation now may well be rejected.

But the alternatives to negotiation are so unacceptable that I continue to believe the effort should and must be made. Ultimately, no other solution is possible. Despite the killing and the destruction, we are in no better position now than we were a year ago—and we will not be in any better position a year from now. I continue to believe that we should go to negotiations in an effort to reach a peaceful and honorable settlement. Perhaps we cannot; but we shall never know until we try.

A negotiated settlement must be less than a victory for either side. Both sides must come to any discussion with at least one basic condition, one point they will not yield. For us, it must be that we will not abandon South Vietnam to forcible take-over by a minority. For our adversaries, it must be that they will not accept a settlement that leaves in the South a hostile government, dedicated to the final physical destruction of all Communist elements, refusing any economic cooperation with the North, dependent upon the continued presence of American military power.

For either side to yield its minimum conditions would be in fact to surrender. If we intend to deny these conditions to our adversaries, then we must defeat them completely. This we should clearly understand—and understand as well the full costs of this course, costs out of all proportion to any benefits we might attain. For wise policy is a setting of priorities—differentiating between that which is merely important and that which is truly essential. And it would be both callous and self-indulgent for those of us who sit comfortably at home to form policy without full, conscious knowledge of the cost to others, young men and women and children, whose lives turn on the abstractions of our discussion.

For more than two years, we have proclaimed our desire to negotiate with our Communist enemy: "Anywhere and anytime," the President has said. Debate has therefore centered on how this desire is to be fulfilled; most often on whether to halt the bombing of the North. How the bombing came to the center of debate and its relationship to negotiations are questions we may begin to examine as of the winter of 1966-67. Hanoi's previous position, known as the Four Points, had been regarded as unacceptable by the United States. Our interpretation was that it required the withdrawal of American forces from South Vietnam and the recognition of the National Liberation Front (NLF) as the "sole genuine representative" of the Vietnamese people, even prior to discussions.

In January of 1967, however, Premier Pham Van Dong told Harrison Salisbury of the New York *Times* that the Four Points should be considered as an agenda for discussion at negotiations rather than preconditions. It was an indication that Hanoi had altered its position: from minimum demands, these had become only bargaining points. This was confirmed by Secretary General U Thant. Then, on January 28, the Foreign Minister of North Vietnam, Nguyen Duy Trinh, said, "If the United States really wants talks, it must first halt unconditionally the bombing raids and all other acts of war" against NorthVietnam. "If the bombings cease completely, good and favorable conditions will be created for the talks," the Foreign Minister said, concluding: "President Johnson said he was only awaiting a sign. Well, he's had the sign." Of equally great significance, the interview made it unmistakably clear that Hanoi was dropping its Four Points as a precondition for negotiations to begin.

Then, on a visit to London that coincided with the four-day Tet truce, Soviet Premier Alexei Kosygin joined the Soviet Union for the first time in the public search for peace. Kosygin said that the first step "should be the unconditional cessation of the bombing of and all other aggressive acts against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam [North Vietnam]. As the Foreign Minister of the DRV declared recently, this step is necessary to enable talks between the DRV and the United States to take place. The Soviet Government welcomes this statement and regards it as an important and constructive proposal for ending the war." Later,

he went further, referring to "only one circumstance which must be considered. . . . The United States of America must unconditionally stop bombings of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and then it would be possible to open negotiations to explore avenues of a political solution. . . . This is a very constructive proposal which makes it possible to get out of the impasse the United States has landed in now."

This declaration came from a man of enormous authority in the Communist world, whose country, then and now, sustains North Vietnam's effort. The statement did not demand that we withdraw our forces, slow down our military effort on the ground, or even halt bombing in South Vietnam or of the infiltration routes in Laos. It did not demand any guarantee that we would never use our planes again at any future time, no matter what our adversary did to enlarge his effort. There was no demand that we accept any terms or conditions, such as the Four Points, in advance of talks. We were simply informed that "to enable talks," we should stop bombing. This message was repeated by Ho Chi Minh, in his letter to President Johnson, even after the bombing had resumed. As late as May, Premier Pham Van Dong said the statements "still had full value." And there are still indications, though far less clear and unequivocal, that a bombing halt would bring negotiations.

We were willing to do this in 1965-66, when we suspended the bombing for 37 days without asking any prior act, signal, or statement in return. Through much of 1967, our adversaries and their friends said negotiations could begin on terms we would have accepted in 1966. Why then did we not try when the conditions were so much more promising?

> "We cast away what may well have been the last best chance to go to the negotiating table."

ONE ARGUMENT HAS BEEN that the United States could not be absolutely certain that Hanoi and Moscow would negotiate if the bombing were stopped. Hanoi's statements, it has been said, conflict with one another, and some could be read as calling for a guarantee that the bombing would be permanently halted even before negotiations began. Examination of the public statements of Hanoi and Moscow in January and after, however, clearly indicates a major shift away from the North Vietnamese bargaining position since 1966, showing a firm intention to come to the conference table once the bombing of North Vietnam was suspended. In any case, the varying interpretations of the Communist statements need not have been serious obstacles to agreement.

In the most serious and urgent crisis of the cold war, we moved toward peace by accepting, in the way we wished to interpret it, that position of our adversaries that contained the greatest hope of swift settlement. At the height of the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, President Kennedy received two conflicting messages from Premier Khrushchev: The first offered to remove the missiles under acceptable conditions; the next day, the demand was for unacceptable concessions in return. President Kennedy simply ignored the second statement and announced his agreement to the first. The crisis was thus resolved without open conflict. Such a technique might have yielded fruitful results in 1967.

A second argument has been that the bombing is necessary to secure our objectives in the South. We began the bombing, as President Johnson told us at Johns Hopkins, for three purposes: "to increase the confidence of the brave people of South Vietnam . . . to convince the leaders of North Vietnam . . . [that] we will not be defeated," and to reduce the flow of men and supplies from the North. But the first two purposes have already been fulfilled by the huge resources and American lives committed to South Vietnam since the bombing began. As to the third purpose, "to slow down aggression," the Secretary of Defense testified in early 1967 that although the bombing of North Vietnam has other values that he supports, "I don't believe the bombing up to the present has significantly reduced, nor any bombing that I would contemplate in the future would significantly reduce, the actual flow of men and materials to the South." He was supported in this view by many greatly respected military observers. Other military men have since stated their conviction that the bombing is an essential handicap to North Vietnamese infiltration, putting forward evidence that many infiltrators die of disease or bombing on the long trail to the South. But in August of 1967, despite a considerable escalation of the air war since February, the Secretary of Defense, although still supporting the bombing, estimated that while "ten to twenty percent of the personnel dispatched to the South by the rulers of North Vietnam never reach the battle area," he also stated that only

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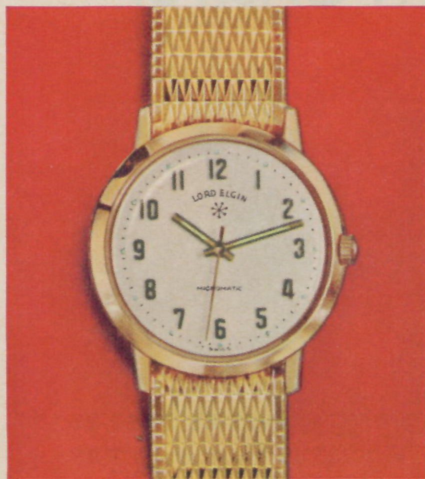

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