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WHY THE NORTH VIETNAMESE WILL KEEP
FIGHTING

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RAND Corporation
Santa Monica, California

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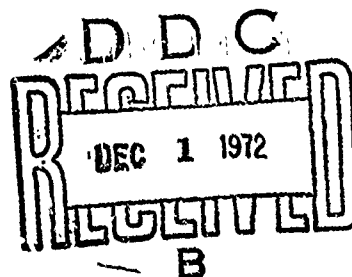
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Brian Michael Jenkins^{*}

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The public statements of North Vietnam's leaders make one thing clear -- North Vietnam will not accept President Nixon's offer. Hanoi will continue the war. This posture will be more than propaganda. The genius of the North Vietnamese people is their tenacity. It is also their most terrible weapon.

Hanoi's apparent determination to go on fighting reflects convictions that in their eyes seem correct -- so correct that the alternative of not fighting may be inconceivable. Confucian doctrine imported from China centuries ago permeates the arguments put forth by the Vietnamese Communists. Terms such as a "just cause," and "legitimate government," dominate the speech of their leaders. Vietnamese Communists firmly believe that they possess the "Mandate of Heaven" to rule all Vietnam and therefore must emerge victorious eventually. To abandon the struggle or to accept any other outcome as permanent would in their eyes be immoral, just as our support of a South Vietnamese government which, from Hanoi's point of view, does not possess the "Mandate of Heaven" is immoral. At first, it seems surprising that the adherents of Communism, a political doctrine of recent origin, could at the same time seriously adhere to an ancient political doctrine such as the "Mandate of Heaven." Are Communists not modernists rather than traditionalists?

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In the case of Vietnam, the answer is no. In Vietnam, Communists often appear more traditionalist than their opponents. The "Workers Party of Vietnam" -- the Communist Party -- is led not by men and women who come from the workers' class, but rather by the descendents of Confucian scholars, many of whom participated in the traditionalist and pro-monarchist resistance movements against the French in the late nineteenth century. Ho Chi Minh himself was the son of a Confucian scholar who served Vietnam's emperor as a minor mandarin. So are Pham Van Dong, North Vietnam's prime minister, General Vo Nguyen Giap, its defense minister, and Xuan Thuy, Hanoi's chief negotiator in Paris, the sons of Confucian scholars. Nguyen Thi Binh, the chief delegate of the Provisional Revolutionary Government, is the granddaughter of a famous Vietnamese poet and scholar who led demonstrations against the French shortly after World War I.

The "Mandate of Heaven" is the right to rule which is conferred upon a man, a group of men, or a party, by Heaven. It has been the source of political legitimacy claimed by all Chinese and Vietnamese emperors. According to the Vietnamese Communists, the "Mandate of Heaven" was passed on to them by Bao Dai, the last emperor of Vietnam, in 1945 when he willingly gave his ceremonial seal and sword to the representatives of Ho Chi Minh. From the moment of this transfer, the struggle waged by the Viet Minh and its successors, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the National Liberation Front, was a moral right and a duty. To challenge it is immoral. Possession of the "Mandate of Heaven" guarantees eventual victory, just as the Communist interpretation of history guarantees the inevitable victory of the Communists. Since Vietnamese

Communists believe they have the "Mandate of Heaven," they must believe they will win. To accept defeat would be to accept that the "Mandate of Heaven" does not work; it would compromise the philosophy upon which Hanoi's leaders have based their entire lives.

With the "Mandate of Heaven" to legitimize their struggle, the Vietnamese Communists must also possess a proper strategy to win the war. The strategy they pursue comes from their own history. It suggests that the present war will be long. Usually faced with enemies who were vastly superior in numbers, such as the Chinese, or vastly superior in technology, such as the French and the Americans, the Vietnamese developed the only resources they had: a terrain suitable for resistance warfare, a tenacious people, and *time*. The way that the Vietnamese have won wars throughout their own history was by fighting for a much longer time than their opponents thought possible. According to our conventional view of warfare, two armies engage in a series of battles which one side wins and the other side loses; rather than incur further losses, the losing side accepts the outcome and sues for peace. But if the losing side ignores its losses, this concept is negated. The winning side is deprived of victory in its classic sense. In that case, the winning side must keep on winning -- a costly undertaking -- until a point is reached at which the winning side tires and withdraws.

In the past thousand years, they have successfully resisted seven attempts by the Chinese to occupy their territory. Their resistance struggle against the Mongols lasted thirty-one years during which they

alternately pursued a strategy of fighting and negotiating. The resistance campaign led by Le Loi in the fifteenth century lasted for ten years. Le Loi's ten-year campaign may provide some clues to understanding the current situation. After four years of fighting, Le Loi launched a series of disastrous attacks on the Chinese which nearly destroyed his army. To prevent further deterioration of his situation, he pretended to sue for peace and thus obtained a truce which allowed him to withdraw his troops and rebuild his strength. Two years later, he launched his army in a surprise attack on the Chinese forces and after four years of continued fighting, the Chinese themselves finally sued for peace.

The French ran into a similar problem. As the Vietnamese are fond of pointing out, it took the French seventy-one years to pacify Vietnam. Anti-French resistance movements continued in one part of the country or another almost continuously from 1859, when the French first landed at Saigon, to 1930 when a widespread nationalist revolt was suppressed. The war to throw out the French lasted eight years.

The Communists have skillfully attached Vietnam's tradition of tenacious warfare to their own struggle. During the war against the French, the Viet Minh named their military campaigns after heroes of earlier resistance campaigns against the Chinese. Military authors in North Vietnam continue to hold up the ancient heroes as examples meaningful in the current struggle.

The tenacity of the Vietnamese was not confined to wars of resistance against foreign invaders. An earlier attempt by North Vietnam to bring South Vietnam under its control produced a war in the seventeenth

century that lasted forty-six years. The Vietnamese conquest of the ancient kingdom of Champa took several centuries to complete. Ho Chi Minh's claim that the Vietnamese would continue to fight for fifteen years, twenty years, longer if necessary, was no idle boast. He was describing a strategy which has proven successful in the past, and which Hanoi's present leaders may regard as the only way they can win the current war.

The notion that North Vietnam's enormous losses of men must cause it to abandon its efforts in the near future should be examined carefully. These losses, while heavy, are not insupportable. According to our own figures, the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong together have lost nearly 800,000 men since the war began. General Giap, in a somewhat dubious interview, openly admitted in 1969 that a half-million men had been lost. Whether this was actually true, and if so, whether out of bravado he was making the point that even if North Vietnam did lose half-million men, the struggle would not be abandoned, we do not know. Nor are we certain how many of those killed were Viet Cong (subtracted from South Vietnam's population) or were regulars in North Vietnam's army. If the figure of 800,000 enemy dead is roughly correct, and if one-half of these were North Vietnamese, then the loss to North Vietnam was 400,000 dead over a period of six years, the bulk of which were killed in the costly offensives of 1968 and early 1969. These losses have not slowed North Vietnam's rapid population growth which is estimated to be anywhere from 3 to 3-1/2 percent annually. By 1980, North Vietnam will have around 30 million people (South Vietnam will have

around 24 million, giving North Vietnam the edge). Population growth is a cause of concern since the country is a food deficit area that just barely manages to feed itself in a good year. Birth control is vigorously advocated by the government, an unlikely policy if the country is supposed to be running out of men to send into battle.

Of course, there are other types of attrition: the attrition of trained cadres and the attrition of will. One cannot say with any certainty how many of its combat leaders North Vietnam is losing, nor how quickly it can replace them, nor can we say at what point Hanoi's will must crack. Obviously it is greater than we ever imagined. North Vietnam has kept the war going for eight years so far (since 1964 when North Vietnam began infiltrating its own men in large numbers), and despite some occasional evidence of lagging spirits at home, the morale of its soldiers remains high, and another offensive is being prepared. The important thing is that if the pressure gets too great, North Vietnam can reduce its military activities and thereby cut its losses. Since the enemy has considerable ability to initiate battles or avoid them, as he desires, he has more control over the rate at which he loses men than we do.

Actually, the burden of continuing the war seems to be greater on South Vietnam than it is on North Vietnam. South Vietnam's need to defend the entire country requires more men than the enemy needs to attack at points he selects. With a style of warfare learned from the Americans and a smaller population than North Vietnam, South Vietnam must field an army more than twice the size of North Vietnam's armed forces. In addition, recruits for the Viet Cong are drawn out of the same pool of able-

bodied men as the army of South Vietnam. And South Vietnam must suffer the losses it inflicts on the native Viet Cong as well as those incurred in the forces on the government side. The civilians killed in the war further drain South Vietnam's population. The burden on the South Vietnamese population, however, is not only the number of casualties, but the enormous size of its armed establishment.

South Vietnam has neither the men nor the economic strength to support its present military establishment. Almost every other able-bodied man is already a soldier. Even with continued American assistance, South Vietnam faces serious economic problems that could produce popular unrest, political agitation, and ultimately government instability, which would be reflected in weakness on the battlefield. Dissatisfaction over continued inflation; unpopular government measures to impose economic austerity or raise revenue; unemployment resulting from American withdrawal; and the plight of South Vietnam's soldiers, who find themselves impoverished by low salaries and soaring costs, could lead to an explosive situation, especially in the cities where the population has concentrated. And the Communists are continually making every effort to exploit these problems.

Of course, North Vietnam is also dependent on its outside backers. Economically and militarily, North Vietnam will be able to continue the war only as long as China and the Soviet Union continue to underwrite its economy and provide it with the materiel it needs for its army. Despite some fretting in Hanoi that China may make a deal with Nixon behind its back, both China and the Soviet Union have agreed to provide

necessary assistance for at least another year and probably will continue to do so after that. The crucial differences between North Vietnam and South Vietnam are these: The population of North Vietnam is more cohesive and more accustomed to rigid government control and the austerity needed to continue a protracted war than are the South Vietnamese. North Vietnam is far more of a totalitarian state than South Vietnam, one-man elections notwithstanding, and, therefore, its government is more able to impose the necessary measures and to silence its critics. Finally, North Vietnam's style of warfare, and its army, austere in costly equipment by comparison with South Vietnam's army, requires far less external support.

The prize is great. To dominate the Southeast Asian mainland, or more specifically, the territory once encompassed in French Indochina, is an ambition shared by many Vietnamese nationalists, northern and southern, Communist and anti-Communist. A Vietnamese paper once claimed in 1939, "We will have the space we need. . . . One day Indochina will no longer be a collection of separate and distinct countries, but a single country impregnated with Vietnamese blood, inspired by Vietnamese dynamism and power of action." A Vietnamese-dominated Indochina, with a total population now of some fifty million, would easily be the dominant power on the peninsula. Given the industriousness that the Vietnamese seem to possess, it easily could become the dominant power of Southeast Asia. Expansion for North Vietnam may be more than just a dream. Considering North Vietnam's rapidly growing population and lack of available riceland, expansion may appear as an economic necessity to Hanoi's leaders.

In suggesting that the North Vietnamese give up the war and remain within their present borders, one should ask what else would they give up by doing so. They would give up a great deal.

In his Will, Ho Chi Minh, who himself had fought for four decades, urged his countrymen to continue the war. Ho Chi Minh died a man venerated by his people. Who among Hanoi's present leaders would risk the betrayal of Ho Chi Minh by suggesting that the war now be abandoned or even postponed? No man has yet attained sufficient control over the party and government to bring about such a dramatic reversal of policy even if he so desired. Ending wars under any condition but victory is a difficult and risky business for the political leadership, as Charles DeGaulle could have said in 1962 or Anwar Sadat probably could say now. *What we do not seem to realize is that "losing" a war may be politically as unacceptable -- or even more so -- for North Vietnam's leadership as for our own. Hanoi too has its hawks. Postponement, with some commitment to future action, probably is the most that any North Vietnamese leader could obtain if that leader, if indeed the collective leadership, were to survive.*

Hanoi's leaders are unlikely to be willing even to postpone the struggle for a long time. They are for the most part old men. The average age of the ruling politburo members is now sixty-three. To postpone the struggle for five or ten years may, for many of them, be to abandon hope of ever seeing victory. Old age and rigidity of views are not always coincident, but these particular old men in Hanoi have spent all of their adult lives fighting. Many of them spent years living in

caves during the war against the French, and they continued to fight under the most adverse circumstances. The present politburo is made up of the survivors of that struggle, those who kept fighting when others quit, and who saw their determination rewarded with the withdrawal of the French.

Almost every branch of human activity in North Vietnam is tightly controlled by the Communist Party, and is geared to the war. The present leadership of North Vietnam might not survive a decision to stop the war. Assuming that they survive pro-war pressures at home and whatever other pressures are put on them, be it China or the Soviet Union or the Viet Cong, where members now have little to lose by fighting, they would still have to face the question of what to do with the army. Some observers have already observed the possibilities of divergent views within the military leadership of North Vietnam; for example, the continuing rivalry between General Vo Nguyen Giap and General Truong Chinh over how the war should be fought, and potential splits between the lower echelon field officers who have done the bulk of fighting in the south and the senior staff officers who remained in the north. For the past six or seven years, one-fourth to one-third of the North Vietnamese army has remained outside of the country, sustaining casualties and putting up with hardships that those who remained in Hanoi did not have to suffer, except for the period during the bombing. North Vietnam's leaders may not be thrilled at the prospect of bringing this army home -- in defeat.

While victory in the south may seem more remote to Hanoi now than it ever has, there remain powerful arguments to continue fighting. This does not exclude considerable flexibility as to how to continue the fighting -- whether by protracted guerrilla warfare, by launching periodic offensives anywhere in Indochina, or by some combination of both. Nor does Hanoi's determination to continue the fighting negate flexibility as to where to fight. South Vietnam will remain the ultimate prize, but both Laos and Cambodia are fields of endeavor for an army that must be kept busy and battle-ready. Laos and Cambodia are especially attractive to North Vietnam. Neither of their armies are any match for the North Vietnamese, enabling Hanoi to inflict embarrassing defeats and occasionally to suck South Vietnam into launching costly offensives. Nor does determination to continue negate some flexibility with regard to time. A postponement of the fighting or, more likely, a scaling down of the fighting for one or two more years allows North Vietnam to rest and rebuild, and the Americans to tire of their commitment and its costs. Anti-war pressure in this country may never again reach the peak it did in 1968, but equally important is a steady erosion of will to bear any part of the burden, even if only the economic burden, of someone else's war. Whatever Americans think of the morality of the war, by now a majority clearly consider it tedious. They are fed up.

Postponement has its risks for North Vietnam. Foremost among them is the worry that South Vietnam's government will be able to consolidate its power. The Viet Cong infrastructure, believed to be a requisite to North Vietnamese military activities in the south, may be destroyed. That,

however, is an argument between those who advocate some form of offensive in the near future and those who would risk waiting a year or two while the Americans complete their withdrawal. In Hanoi, whether the war should be carried on or not is not even part of the debate. The prospects for the future are for the North Vietnamese to continue fighting, somehow, somewhere, and for some time.