Hanoi in My Time

JOHN COLVIN

The summer of 1967 began in March, with no real spring, moving from the drizzling chill of winter directly into temperatures of 100 degrees and corresponding humidity.

A comparable change, from the relative absence of U.S. activity over the northeast quadrant of North Vietnam in the fall and winter to aerial bombardment of some intensity, began in April, although not yet within the 10-mile (prohibited) inner circle of Hanoi. Targets, most of them invisible to us, were struck around the circumference of the city and included airfields, military complexes, industry, storage dumps, and transportation. While the targets were invisible to Hanoi residents, the attackers and—at least in the early stages (for they later left the battle)—the defending MiG fighters could be plainly seen maneuvering at high altitudes. Although there were few combats in the classic sense of dogfights, the flash of antiaircraft (AA) guns and, very occasionally, the twisting spiral of U.S. planes shot down in flames by surface-to-air missiles (SAMs) were seen. Smoke and fires from burning installations rose on the horizon: the crash of the northern antiaircraft batteries alternated with the thunder of high explosives from projectiles striking objectives in the near distance.

For the resident all this was an unwelcome change. Hitherto, we had had to contend only with intermittent visits from reconnaissance aircraft and spasmodic raids from more lethal formations. Even the latter tended to occur in clusters over a period of a week or so and at predictable times, usually at about 2:30 in the afternoon. As I was accustomed to taking a siesta every day after lunch, I had been able to sleep peacefully through most of these raids, waking refreshed to a cup of tea, a later stroll through the streets, conversation at the tennis court in the grounds of the French delegation-general, visits to friends on the Grand Voleur, dinner, and perhaps a movie with the Canadians.

Not much of that was possible after April. Even when attack was manifestly not against the city but against targets in the outskirts or even farther away, the Demo-
and tension between the self-image of Islam of the thirteenth and twentieth centuries remain considerable. Likewise, there remain many problems linked with the "marrying of generations" through modernization.

To date, as the sale and display of the contrasting literature at the Damascus gate so aptly symbolizes, tradition and modernity still coexist uneasily. Does Islam possess the intellectual vitality to move beyond this stage, to create a symbiosis that will permit its adherents to organize their societies on the basis of Islamic traditions, yet do so in ways that are responsive to contemporary needs and opportunities? This is not a new challenge for Islam and we have noted the complexities involved. Yet the significance of this Islamic revival depends ultimately upon its ability to create an effective, culturally satisfying, and morally acceptable process of development.

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The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (D.R.V.) would insist on declaring an air raid on Hanoi itself. The sirens wailed up to 30 times a day: the din and that of the bombs and artillery often precluded sound sleep. No one was permitted out of doors during these incidents on pain of being incarcerated by the militia in one of the city’s air-raid shelters, cylindrical concrete holes sunk some four feet deep in the pavements, uncomfortable for those of European height and bulk.

The unfortunate Mr. Keller, Swiss ambassador in Peking, who visited Hanoi four times between 1966 and 1967 and lunched at my house on each occasion, rather than face such immurement en route to his hotel was obliged by air raids on every visit to spend the entire afternoon with me in the house. The ambassador was a kind man, but the limitations of Vietnam as a subject for discussion must have tried his patience through these long hours. Nor did the work of calligraphic detection on the Chinese characters painted on the hall columns greatly tax his ingenuity; although others have transcribed them as incitements to sexual desire, for the house was once a brothel, Mr. Keller insisted that they advertised Horlick’s Malted Milk. (The Hanoi agent for that product had once owned the house.) But at our final meeting, the Swiss ambassador made me, after an immensely elaborate speech, a formal presentation, not—as I had begun to hope—of a Longines watch but a bar of Toblerone chocolate.

Another foreign colleague found the raids rather more tiresome. While playing tennis with his wife against another couple, he was induced by the sound of the air-raid sirens to quit the court at the double and in mid-serve, abandoning racket and wife in favor of the French cellar. Nervously emerging after the all-clear, he leaped into his motorcar, bound for home, wife quite forgotten. Sirens again sounded. The timorous diplomatist jumped out of the vehicle while the latter was in motion and into a cylindrical shelter, on top of which a militiaman then firmly placed the concrete lid; the colleague there remained in warm, green, stagnant water infested by mosquitoes and, he alleged, frogs, for over two hours. In the meanwhile, his car had proceeded unmanned down the boulevard, eventually to collide with the Hanoi railway station.

His ambassador occupied himself by smuggling young Vietnamese prostitutes in the trunk of his car to and from their dwellings and his residence. (The consequences of this practice, also followed by the more dashing of the Russians, would have been severe in the event of discovery by the North Vietnamese authorities.) During one visit to his house, I was introduced by him to the latest of these girls, reclining voluptuously in his double bed; she seemed as insouciantly pleased with her sallow lover as he was delighted in her possession. But during the height of the bombing, he sought—for reasons of self-preservation—his own government’s approval temporarily to withdraw from Hanoi. For reasons of state unconnected with Vietnam, the request was not granted. The ambassador had, however, assumed approval, sold the embassy motorcars to his own profit and decamped to Hong Kong, leaving his deputy to proceed to diplomatic receptions on a bicycle, his pretty little wife on the pillion, an unusual form of locomotion for heads of mission.
Anne de Quirielle, the wife of the French "national delegate," was of sterner stuff. She made plain, when asked by a Western journalist for her reactions to the bombing of Hanoi, that she sought only a rifle and access to the roof of her husband's mission, from which vantage point she proposed to shoot at incoming U.S. aircraft. The Americans in Saigon took publication of this absurd statement uncommonly badly. But it was a sentiment shared, if not articulated, by several of those few in North Vietnam who wished the Americans no harm, indeed supported their cause; it should have been obvious that when one is being bombed, one seeks to ward off the bomber irrespective of the latter's purpose or flag. *Cet animal est tres mechant: quand on l'attaque, it se defend* (This is a nasty creature: when attacked, he defends himself).

Others were less stalwart. In early May it seemed to me that the combination of summer heat, increasingly consistent bombardment, and perhaps fear of further escalation of both phenomena was affecting the stamina of some missions. I then determined, by indirect inquiry, that five of my colleagues had proposed to their governments, separately and without mutual consultation, that "because of the current absence of political activity between the D.R.V. and the U.S.A. and the consequent lack of a role for themselves," they should remove their missions temporarily to other centers, Phnom Penh or Vientiane, or even place them en disponibilite. One of these missions was West European, one East European, one Middle Eastern, and two Asian. At least two of these represented communist countries, and all in various degrees opposed the policies of the United States and supported those of North Vietnam. None of them was likely to be asked to play any part whatever in U.S.-D.R.V. negotiations or in any other "political activity"; their proposals, all of which were refused, were based on those considerations, not declared as such to their governments, outlined at the beginning of this paragraph. To pretend, however, that I did not share them would be hypocritical; it was not hypocrisy so much as self-respect that prevented me from joining them.

I doubt if even the Soviets felt much devotion to their duties during those days of noise and sweat. Although Mr. Gromyko had told a Western interlocutor in the fall of 1966 that U.S. escalation would involve not only Chinese but also direct Soviet intervention with troops, the threat had now been demonstrated as idle. The Russians had—it must have been clear to their embassy—to grin and bear it like everyone else. One of their senior officials, converted from straight vodka to gin and tonic in the course of repeated visits to my house, found the prospect tolerable. (He later died of delirium tremens.) Another, with previous service in London, laid maddening emphasis on his acquaintance with Reggie Maudling, pronounced by him "Muddling." A Soviet military attaché, in the time he could spare from complaining about D.R.V. mismanagement of SAMs or from chasing Tonkinese waitresses, recounted interminable dirty stories in an English which few, including Dr. Deb, the Indian medical officer, could grasp.

Some idea of the effects of the bombing outside Hanoi had been given to me earlier by a traveler in North Vietnam; this traveler, although far from pro-American, was
careful to distinguish his own de visu observations from the allegations of his North Vietnamese guides. (In this he agreeably differed from the distasteful performance, ultimately disastrous to U.S. policies, of Harrison Salisbury in December 1966. Salisbury’s articles appeared in the *New York Times* as his own personal observations made during a visit to North Vietnam; it later became known that they were based almost wholly on North Vietnamese propaganda pamphlets and on statistics provided by D.R.V. officials. His description, for example, of Nam Dinh as a cotton-and-silk town with no military objectives, when the city in fact contained POL [petroleum, oil, and lubricants] storage, a power plant, and a railroad yard, and was surrounded by antiaircraft and surface-to-air missiles, ensured that Salisbury received no Pulitzer Prize. But the articles and their implication, drawn chiefly from North Vietnamese falsehoods, that the United States was deliberately bombing civilian targets carried worldwide conviction. While only the first of many propaganda catastrophes of this kind, Salisbury’s *New York Times* articles had a decisive effect throughout America in falsely persuading Americans that their government was engaged on a brutal and inhumane campaign.)

My traveler told me that there had been, as a result of the bombing, only one undamaged bridge between Hanoi and Than Hoa in the southeast of the D.R.V. All the others, including railway bridges, had been damaged or destroyed but subsequently repaired by teams on permanent standby using spare girders and adjustable parts stored in the vicinity. (Pontoon bridges, hidden during the day, had also been observed.) Nevertheless, the journey of 170 kilometers, which took place in the spring of 1967 at night, by lorries in convoy under dimmed lights from the western exit from Than Hoa to 50 kilometers east of Hanoi (when lights were switched on and speed increased), took only 5½ hours. The convoy extinguished all lights under air attack; on that occasion, which was no more than the dropping of a flare, the convoy had been badly bunched and was separated to secure distances by girl wardens apparently stationed in each area for the purpose. (The same journey in early April took seven hours.)

Between Phu Ly, a town along the main route to the south that had been largely evacuated in 1966 and later almost totally destroyed, and Than Hoa, he saw electric light on two occasions only. The first had been in one of the less-ruined streets of Than Hoa and the second in a badly damaged but just functioning power station near the Ham Rong Bridge. He saw no piped water supply in any town or village of the area. The center and the main streets of Than Hoa had been heavily damaged; shops open sold little more than oil, salt, cloth, and occasionally cigarettes. Brick buildings in the countryside, regarded by the North Vietnamese as automatic targets, were said to have been evacuated, with hospitals, schools, etc., now being housed in bamboo houses. Education continued, and medical care under primitive conditions (mud floors, no piped water or light, insufficient doctors) was fairly devoted and as efficient as the circumstances permitted. Casualties, particularly those caused by bomb casings, were said to be widespread among the peasantry and not easy to cure. Doctors were mainly "pharmacists," although there were a few good surgeons.
frequently operating by flashlights. In and around all towns or villages attacked, the traveler observed Vietnamese antiaircraft guns of various calibers.

Bombing, other than along the railway line, where it appeared to be concentrated near halts, small stations, and their attendant hamlets, had sometimes seemed in this area to lack the precision shown against targets such as bridges and oil tanks elsewhere in the country. Villages, ostensibly no more than agricultural cooperatives, had been "wiped out" by 500-pound bombs, of which the craters were clearly visible; civilian casualties and damage to civilian housing in villages and towns seemed very high, again largely due to North Vietnamese AA defenses sited in built-up areas on their perimeters.

On clear days air activity had been virtually continual from dawn to dusk. The constant series of alerts seriously inhibited schooling, repair work, and cultivation; alert followed all-clear incessantly. Attacks against main road communications had frequently been successful and accurate in this region, but subsidiary roads had usually taken the traffic without excessive delays.

The diet of the "Youth Volunteers," who had some responsibility for repair work, consisted of rice, vegetables, "soya nuts," and bananas. In spite of this adequate but limited subsistence, which was, of course, lower for noncadres, and of the bombing and monotonous labor, the traveler was impressed by the health, determination, and high spirits of the population as a whole. "After all, why not?" he said. "They've never really known much else. And it is exciting and absorbing for them. Since they are unaware of what is certainly known to their leaders—the impossibility of military victory—they have also a goal which transcends self-defense."

Petrol supplies were cached in drums (5-feet round and 10-feet long) at various points along the road, virtually inaccessible to U.S. aircraft. Industry, as generally recognized, was unknown in the area, although small workshops, mainly for spare parts, repairs, etc., existed. Mechanization of agriculture, apart from pumps, of which there were few, had scarcely begun. South of Than Hoa, because of damage to the roads, bicycles played a rather larger role in transportation than did lorries, each bicycle being modified to carry a load of 440 pounds; but a major cause of delay was the time needed to reassemble the pontoon bridges—regularly disassembled at dawn—at nightfall.

There had been considerable naval shelling of the coastline to the south of Than Hoa, and one village had allegedly absorbed 1,000 projectiles. But the traveler had been forbidden to visit the beaches on the alleged grounds of "defensive preparation against invasion."

Salisbury, incidentally, called on me upon his arrival in Hanoi, asking for my views on the situation in the D.R.V. (I do not complain that he included none of them in his articles.) When he visited me at the conclusion of his visit, he asked me plainly if I had "a direct telegraphic link with Dean Rusk," then U.S. secretary of state. I said that I had not, but added that if he had a message for the secretary, I might at least be able to transmit it to my own government.

He then told me that after his reception that day by the prime minister, Pham Van
Dong, he was confident that the D.R. V. had made a decisive advance, in four points which they had not previously conceded, toward U.S.-North Vietnamese negotiations. He asked me to telegraph them to my government for conveyance to the United States. I asked him in return first to outline the points. He did so: they were the notorious Four Points demanded by the North Vietnamese, in the person of Pham Van Dong himself, as long ago as April 1965, unaltered and inexorable. I told him so. He said in surprise that "he had never heard of them before."

I do not understand people who will not do elementary homework before exposing their own solutions to complicated problems. Nor do I understand an institution which will permit attacks on persons or governments on the basis of unverified information supplied by the subject's principal enemies. It seems to me that there is something wrong with a civilization in which such people, and institutions, are enabled to exploit the golden calf of "circulation" to promulgate, however unwittingly, untruth. If "circulation" requires, or even permits, falsehood, then—without advocating censorship—must we not at least try either to establish a system of consultation and trust between the media and administration or to ensure that the latter has proper channels of reply? If we do not do so, Truth will not prevail, and all our decisions will then be as evil as are those of our enemies.

Salisbury wrote to me some weeks later, cloddishly enclosing a list of questions on the D.R. V.; but I had by then seen the New York Times articles, and did not reply.

II

On the morning of May 19, 1967, I visited my vice-consul, Geoffrey Livesey, in his quarters behind the consulate. Below the apartment lay a green courtyard planted with small trees and scrub vegetation; his servant's rooms with their louvered doors were below the balcony running around two sides of the square.

Geoffrey gave me a drink. The overhead fan in the living room turned briskly, rendering a little more tolerable the damp, heavy midday heat. The thought of another four months of that cruel summer was depressing. But Livesey was not only young and adventurous, he was also uncomplaining, and I had no wish to intrude less stoical concerns on his self-sufficiency. The air-raid sirens sounded, and we walked out onto the balcony.

As we stood there, seven or eight United States F-105 Thunderchief fighter-bombers, flying at scarcely more than roof-top height and no more, it seemed, than 100 yards away, shot across our vision at what appeared—so tight was the space in which the whole incident was framed between houses and sky—enormous speed. They had come on us suddenly out of nowhere, the hard, gray, sleek aircraft, in superb formation at approximately 600 mph, disappearing for an instant behind the trees and buildings that lay between us and the power station (thermal power plant) less than one mile to the south, and then quickly climbing clear and away. As they had hurtled past us, so close it seemed we could almost touch them or call to the pilots, we had seen the rockets fired from the pods under their wings. Almost simultaneously, such lights as were on in the apartment went out, the fan stopped
turning, and a column of dust, smoke, and flame rose from the direction of the power station. (As the planes had penetrated the city's defenses by coming in under the radar screen, the first antiaircraft batteries opened up only when the raiders had not only departed but were probably 20 miles away.) As we were shortly to observe, the performance of this squadron disposed of every Communist or other illusion about the laxity of American bombing or the imprecision of U.S. bombing techniques.

The all-clear wailed; stillness descended. The apartment, without the touch of air from the revolving fan, was already crushingly hot.

Because we had no wish to be falsely accused of acting as spotters or observers for the U.S. Air Force, we did not usually go out of our way deliberately to inspect the results of air raids. But on this occasion, personal considerations demanded that we at least look at the target on the ground.

Antiaircraft guns, surrounded by their agitated crews, were sited among the rain trees in the park. There was an air of tense activity, almost hysteria; orders were bellowed in glottal tones. The men ran around their positions as if further attack were imminent. Fists were shaken at the sky; little groups of civilians whispered apprehensively together. The war was at last in the middle of Hanoi; the city, simmering in the heat, responded. The harsh determination on the faces of the gunners, the discipline and urgency gave an impression of devotion to country that was frightening in its implacability. It was also, because the air defenses had no chance at all against similar raids, pathetic and oddly moving. Perhaps neutral diplomats in London during the blitz also caught the mood of the defenders and, if only subconsciously and during the height of the battle, identified with guts and courage against the enemy. It was a strange, multiform, and disturbing moment.

The power station, an oblong gray brick or concrete building, was about 100-feet high with a ground plan of some 600 by 300 feet; it was topped by tall black chimneys and surrounded by terraced houses. The flames had died down by the time we approached it, but the dust still rose from fallen masonry. The building had been repeatedly struck by high explosives: the chimneys had collapsed, and the whole structure, gaping with holes caused by the rockets, seemed also to be listing drunkenly to one side. (We also viewed it from the other side, on our return home by the dyke road.) There was, in our opinion, no hope at all for it. The accuracy of the attack had also been such that out of the complex of the 50 or so small private houses around the power plant, only three had been at all damaged, and those from blast rather than direct hits.

Luncheon on our return to the residence included a rather disagreeable pate.

"What is this pate, Monsieur Nguyen?" I asked the cook in facetious inquiry. "Is it dog?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Black dog or white dog?"

"Black dog, Monsieur," said Nguyen in shocked reply, "I would never serve a man white dog."

"Why not, Monsieur Nguyen?"
"Black dog makes men strong." He flexed his scrawny arm.
"What does white dog do then?"
"It makes women weak."

The culinary dogs were, indeed, especially bred in and sold from the quarter around the west end of the Paul Daumer Bridge, a practice which, I have been since informed, has endured into 1980. The particular incident seemed to fit in well with everything else that had happened that day.

Power and light were still off that evening; the sirens had sounded almost incessantly throughout the day. Felix Greene, the British journalist and writer on Mao Tse-tung's China, then resident of California, dined with me by candlelight, and we listened to the thunder of bombing north of the city. Felix Greene told me that Cuban interlocutors from their embassy at Hanoi had accused me of being an American spy. I replied that all I knew about Cuban activity in North Vietnam was their habit of spitting and throwing stones at bound American pilots on carts or led as captives through the streets of the town. There seemed no reason, therefore, why their sly malignity should not include accusations of the sort that Greene described.

"Are you an American spy?" he asked.
"No."
"I didn't think you were. You don't look like one." The ridiculous exchange could only have been conducted between Englishmen.

Felix was staying in the Metropole, his room festooned with files, cameras, and audio equipment; he told me later that the atmosphere under his mosquito net that night had been like a sauna. It was even worse in the little residence, and I slept on a mattress on the balcony with a lighted coil nearby to deter the insects. The sound of B-52s to the east was clearly audible. Before I went to sleep, I thought of Cozzens' words in Guard of Honor: "Downheartedness was no man's part. A man must stand up and do the best he can with what there is.... if mind failed you, seeing no pattern; and heart failed you, seeing no point, the stout, stubborn will must yet be up and doing."

And I thought too of that meditation of Marcus Aurelius which ran: "Wherever a man takes up his post, either because he thinks it is the best place or because his officer has placed him there, there I think he should stay and face the dangers, taking nothing into account, neither death nor anything else, in comparison with dishonor."

The North Vietnamese were probably thinking much the same things that night.

Next day the fans and solitary air conditioner in the residence remained silent; in the office, the temperature had mounted by late afternoon to 140 degrees, like the engine room of an old cruiser. Geoffrey and I sat shirtless or chatted with Monsieur Xuan; the latter professed to believe that power would somehow be restored within a short period. We had seen the power station and knew that he was finally wrong.

To the continued roll of bombing, I started to draft a comprehensive telegram to the Foreign Office on the past 24 hours' events. Having described the raid on the city, the condition of the power plant, and its consequences, I concluded that there
was no possibility known to me of restoring any electric services; Hanoi, my last paragraph would have read, must now be finished as a functioning industrial and economic city.

Geoffrey had started to work on the accounts, pausing from time to time to file his nails with an emery board. For all the apprehension he showed, he might have been sitting in Great George Street on an inactive afternoon. I handed him my finished telegram for encipherment and dispatch.

At that moment the lights went on, the fans started to turn, and the rattle of the box air conditioner began. Across the street, the repair factory was once more brightly lit.

There was no more means then, than there is even today, of determining what had happened. The power station could have been less gravely damaged than we had supposed; mobile generators could have been brought into the area (for electric current was not restored to the entire city, only to our quarter and to a few governmental and other buildings); or another but more distant power station could have taken the load. The lesson, however, was of the astonishing preparedness and resourcefulness of the N.R.V.; only continual air attack of a kind that Rolling Thunder had not yet initiated would surmount those qualities.

But Rolling Thunder did, thereafter, or so it appeared to us, begin to do precisely that, although without again striking the power plants or other targets in central Hanoi. The objectives, attacked without respite for the next two weeks, remained on the periphery of the city. The noise of bombing and gunfire was almost continual, and the damage to Vietnamese equipment and weapons considerable; but by the time I left for London on consultations in early June, morale, health, and the flow of war materiel to Hanoi had not decisively diminished.

In London I was received by the prime minister, Harold Wilson, in his room at the House of Commons. Sir Harold, then Mr. Wilson, showed chief interest in the conditions of life in Hanoi, in the “feel” of the city; I was pleased that he really did smoke a pipe and sat with his feet resting in a desk drawer.

George Brown, then secretary of state, allowed me an hour and a half of his time in the magnificent room in the Foreign Office once occupied by grandees like Lord Curzon. He was kinder to me, and certainly more relaxed, than I think the latter would have been, offering me an excellent sherry and rejecting all attempts by his private secretary to remind him of the cabinet meeting in progress. (“I’ve got John here; I’m not going to waste my time there.”) Mr. Brown’s main concern was for the possibilities for U.S.-North Vietnamese negotiations on which, from my knowledge of Hanoi, I could offer little hope and said so. He listened to me carefully. His own views were balanced and extraordinarily well informed. It was impossible not to feel affection and respect for him. His departure in 1970 from the House of Commons deprived the United Kingdom of one of its most human men and British life of one of its wisest political leaders; in discarding him as their candidate, the Belper Labor party dealt a savage but, more important, a stupid blow to democracy. He was a good, lovable man.

“John, I don’t see your telegrams until I’m in bed at night. I’m religious, you know. When I read them, I get down on my knees and pray for you.”
"That's a very ambiguous remark, Secretary of State."
"You know damned well what I mean."

After he had at last dismissed me and we were in the private office, I remarked to the private secretary, Murray MacLehose (now governor of Hong Kong), that the depth and scope of the interview had been extremely impressive, particularly since the June 1967 (Arab-Israeli) war was still raging.

"Yes," said MacLehose. "And bear in mind that you're about the only visitor in the last few days who hasn't come flying out of the door with the secretary of state's boot behind his gallabiyeh."

Rolling Thunder was not pursued during the early part of my 10-day absence but began again toward the end of my stay in England. Rumors in Saigon, when I passed through on my way back north, spoke of a projected American strategy to bomb the North Vietnamese dykes on a massive scale. Certainly, millions of deaths had been caused under the French regime and untold agricultural and other damage by a natural flooding of the Red River; to breach the dykes artificially would bring the same result, putting even Hanoi under water to a depth of at least 11 feet. I do not believe that this option was ever seriously considered at the highest levels in Washington. Anyway, the policy was never executed, and the rumors may have been no more than deception, as a further means of pressure on the D.R.V. authorities. This did not deter the D.R.V. from announcing almost every day on Hanoi radio (VNA) or in Nanh Dan, the party daily, that the USAF was carrying out such attacks; although these statements were quite untrue, many of the missions bought collapsible boats against the perceived likelihood of major flooding. I was discouraged by my government from either buying a boat or commissioning the construction of an air-raid shelter under the consulate. Both actions, it was thought, might have been seen by the North Vietnamese as an act of collusion by America's supposed ally at Hanoi with presumed aggressive planning by the United States against the D.R.V. The argument, it is worth recalling today, seemed sensible at the time.

In the fall of 1966 or the winter of 1966-1967, a delegation from the Czechoslovak government had arrived in Hanoi to advise the North Vietnamese on the modalities of carrying the propaganda war to the continental United States. The flow to Hanoi of grisly "Western" journalists, television "personalities," disaffected minority groups, "tribunals," "parliamentary" commissions, "concerned" writers, "independent" or "international" jurists, doctors, trade unionists, and other riff-raff, most of whose expenses were paid by the D.R.V. government, began and hardly ever stopped. The tide of hatred for America, pulled by falsehoods of Marxist, neo-Marxist, or Trotskyist professional manufacture, started thereafter to infiltrate the American media and eventually the "intellectual" establishment. By the summer of 1967 it was clear, even to an isolated diplomatic mission in Hanoi, that the American effort to prevent a totalitarian regime from obliterating a free country was being resisted by the totalitarians as much—and with the connivance of their supposed opponents—in America as in Vietnam. (One publication, incidentally, described me as "the lanky British ambassador [sic], a veteran of 22 [sic] years in Indochina, who stalked the Hotel Metropole in white colonialist linen suit.")
picture presented, of undersized and “freedom-loving” northern democrats bravely struggling against a brutal aggressor, was not one recognizable in either Saigon or Hanoi; in the south, aggression, atrocity, and repression seemed, rather, the D.R.V.’s characteristics, and in the north, regimentation and the absence of political liberty. But neither the extermination by the People’s Army of Vietnam of entire southern communities nor the massacres in the north during land reform distracted American intellectuals from the prospect of humiliating, if not butchering, their own country.

By late July, however, although no political movement was evident, there were signs in Hanoi of a growing sense of reality induced by the continued bombing.

Although “neutralist” diplomats continued to report the allegedly private claims of D.R.V. officials that a negotiated timetable for United States military withdrawal from the Republic of South Vietnam (R.V.N.) might extend up to three years, there now appeared to be unwilling acceptance that this would form no part of U.S. planning for the R.V.N. until much greater political and military stability had been achieved in that country. Some diplomats continued to assert their belief that a cessation of American bombing would, apart from talks, result in a drying up of North Vietnamese infiltration to the south after an initial, say 15-day, increase. They would not confirm whether this was their view or that of their official contacts, nor would they substantiate their belief that a halt in U.S. troop increases would result in similar D.R.V. concessions. Neither did they satisfactorily reply to my question whether the U.S. military could accept enemy reinforcement extending over 15 days on a scale comparable to that of the Tet truce. Otherwise, there was a fairly widely held belief that “Hanoi was going to catch it again badly” before or after the Saigon elections, but that perhaps the next step in escalation was more likely to be the mining of the port of Haiphong.

A trained medical observer, who treated few North Vietnamese but kept his eyes open, told me at this time that he had seen early signs of malnutrition among between 60 to 90 percent of the children (according to the nature of the symptom) in Hanoi. These signs were lack of skin “luster,” moisture at the outer corners of the eyes, scabies on the palms of the hands, fissured tongues, prominent ribs, swollen bellies, and worms. Neither I nor anyone else I knew had seen major evidence of such complaints except in very young babies, and my informant was quick to admit that he had been unable to examine the main indicators (liver and spleen), and that, for instance, swollen bellies were nothing like so gross as those in Africa or in parts of India. (Lice were much worse, but that was another matter.) He asserted, nonetheless, that the present diet must result in serious ill health among children in two to three years, with permanent effect on their subsequent adult condition. (From scattered comment, I thought that all this might be more marked in the provinces, particularly near the Chinese frontier; it was thought anyway that there were now no more than 400,000 out of 1.2 million permanent residents of Hanoi.) It was not his contention nor mine that these symptoms were visible in the army, among most cadres or among factory workers here; the food eaten by the latter was, as I had myself recently observed, adequate although containing items visually repellant.
There was a noticeable increase in "grimmness," in other words, depression, compensated by a deliberate step-up in endurance which was probably to be attributed to the great heat of summer as much as to conditions of scarcity. (This did not apply to young women who remained neat, clean, and cheerful although—or because—there had been a definite increase in prostitution, perhaps due to the rising cost of living.) Bicycles were going slower, and there seemed to be a decrease in energy. Pebbles, even stones, had been thrown at Europeans, including myself, from unseen sources which had not, fortunately, happened to me before in generally well-mannered Southeast Asia. However silly it might have sounded, I recalled the remark of Anne de Quirielle, who arrived at my house one Sunday with a cut hand to which she applied Gordon's gin: "I wonder if it might not be due to pro-Chinese Vietnamese who mistake us for Russians." I did not myself think so; rather, "it isn't the heat, it's the humidity," or that children or the xenophobia common to most countries in wartime might be responsible.

I felt that only meant that the battle, waged by brilliantly "encouraging" Vietnamese domestic propaganda against the long, hot summer, might have to be pursued with greater vigor during the next few weeks. I thought that propaganda might win this time; but increasing efforts might have to be made in the near future. For the first time, I was beginning to believe that in spite of the history of that extraordinary people over the past 22 years, of their proven ability to withstand far worse suffering in other towns and villages of the D.R.V. than they had had to withstand in Hanoi, of their tenacity, of the implacable aims of their leadership, they must have a physical limit sometime. I could not predict when it would be reached, perhaps not in 1967, nor what form it would take—presumably slow collapse—but unless the war were further internationalized, I thought that the limit might come.

As an incidental indication of the seriousness with which the D.R.V.'s communist allies regarded the present juncture, heads of mission then absent included the Bulgarian, Cuban, Czech, Hungarian, Pathet Lao, Polish, Rumanian, and Soviet. (It was true, of course, that Le Thanh Nghi's annual economic mission was said to be about to leave Peking for some of those countries, but their absence was at least a sign that, as I said earlier, there was no immediate political initiative in view.) The Chinese ambassador had still not returned to Hanoi after six months' "sick leave"; the Indonesian ambassador had still not been succeeded; the United Arab Republic had replaced neither their ambassador nor their charge ad interim. There was "no one here" other than charges except ourselves, the French, the Indian, the East German, and the Albanian, and I was not sure about the latter, who kept the most narrow of profiles at the best of times.

Life, meanwhile, continued. In spite of the bombing, a crate of champagne and several of hock and claret reached me by the overland route via Nanning from Hong Kong. The cathedral, guided by an archbishop appointed not by the Vatican but by the D.R.V. regime, and boasting an inexhaustible supply of young male and female Tonkinese novices, held midnight masses at which both the church itself and the concourse outside were crowded with worshippers or, at least, with spectators.
Well-placed canards continued to assert that their Vietnamese captors were forcing American prisoners to carry out manual labor on the Paul Daumer Bridge or near any installation from which the Vietnamese sought to deter U.S. air attack. (The blast from the August raid on the bridge by B-52s had lifted me bodily backwards from the residence balcony and slammed me against the back wall of the living room.) A Vietnamese customs officer insisted on opening the icebox that I had brought up from a journey with the bag to Saigon; Livesey reported to me with pleasure that the only crab still alive therein had nipped the official's fingers to the bone. Two more peace initiatives were received from London in the form of cypher telegrams of over 1,000 groups each. By the time that we deciphered them, they had been announced on the wireless and were under customary attack by Nan Dinh and VNA.

Mr. Louhanapessy, the Indonesian charge d'affaires, whose French was exiguous, told me of a district of Hanoi in which "chickens" were available.

"A man near the Grand Lac took me by the sleeve and, muttering, 'Vous voulez une poule, voulez une poule?' led me toward a dark alley which seemed to be full of girls. I shook him off, but I thought that my cook might be interested. One can't get much of that sort of thing here."

One could not indeed. To ask Mr. Louhanapessy, nevertheless, for the address would have been imprudent, still more to deliver a French language lesson or instruction on what he might have missed.

By September, the time for poules, feathered or otherwise, had passed. The evidence of malnutrition was now clear, and among adults as well as children. Food, other than that little provided by collectivized agriculture and private plots in the D.R.V., was not coming in from China, North Vietnam's main source of supply. American bombing of the entry points into Vietnam from that country, as well as Sino-Soviet differences, had had their substantive effects. In the streets, offices, and factories, the population could barely get about their duties; even the residence staff, better fed than the rest of their compatriots, dragged themselves 'round the house. The hospitals were filled with cases of hunger edema as well as of wounds. (Bombing of the power lines of Hanoi at that time brought another danger, fortunately of short duration, that of failure of the electric water pumps; for three days there was no water supply throughout the district. Mass epidemic, in the already unsanitary conditions of the capital, could not have been far away.) The symptoms of disease noted in late July had begun to spread. The country and its people were close to a collapse which, for the first time, no amount of excited exhortation could correct.

And every morning since I reached Hanoi, the streets of the quarter had been lined with war materiel brought in overnight from China across the Paul Daumer Bridge, amphibious vehicles, artillery, armored fighting vehicles, Sergeant surface-to-air missiles on flatbeds, saucily parked even outside the British and Canadian missions. By the time that I returned from London in June, their numbers had somewhat decreased. By August and September there were none at all, and early-morning
constitutionals in other districts and to the main railway station itself showed that the explanation did not lie in diversification elsewhere.

I had no authority to speak on the purposes of the war; they had been amply covered by observers as various as Professor P.J. Honey and Stokely Carmichael. Each step in the war, from the rearming of the *Infanterie Coloniale* in Saigon in the autumn of 1945 onwards, had had an apparent political inevitability that only hindsight showed to have been of its own time only, and not always even that. Nor could I discuss American military strategy or its results in the south. But if it were the American objective to destroy the National Liberation Front’s (NLF) infrastructure by military means in South Vietnam and by aerial interdiction in the North of support facilities and lines of communication, then I could comment on the effects of the latter tactic on the D.R.V.’s ability to continue the war.

If the Viet Cong were really losing more men in the South than they could recruit locally or import from the D.R.V., then, failing Chinese intervention, the major war was over. The bombing was causing losses in men and materiel and serious delays, possibly unacceptable to a European power; conditions were medieval, industry suffered, to say the least, from dispersal, food was tight and agriculture undermanned, the distribution system was imperfect, electricity and power were variable, damage to lines of communication was enormous, no one liked being bombed or separated from their families, and a high proportion of the manpower was devoted to repair. Supplies through China were certainly affected by the Cultural Revolution as well as, now, by round-the-clock bombing on arrival at the border. No matter how many nonreturn aid pacts were signed with the bloc, the D.R.V. knew that the socialist countries preferred a negotiated solution.

I had once wondered whether the North Vietnamese were objectively cornered; their line of march (currently expressed as “reunification”) had, for centuries, been southwards, and I had doubted if they would give up. They had known that the Sino-Soviet bloc must continue to support them, and they did not therefore need to be too concerned about their own industrial capacity. Manpower shortages, at least in the north of the D.R.V., had been eased by Chinese labor with its own self-defense along the lines of communication; and again, since a political decision had been taken years ago to postpone industrialization in wartime, the “wastage” of Robert McNamara’s “five million men” on repair work had not really been waste at all.

The North Vietnamese majority had begun, as workers and citizens, from a nil base; their suffering and privation had not been, until recently, intolerable to them. Indeed, that majority, because of the purpose which it had been indoctrinated to assume and because of communal interdependence, even of pride, aroused by their difficulties, had probably been, until the summer of 1967, happier than it had ever been: Government and party control had been pervasive, but it had not then, at least in Western terms, needed to be totally repressive. Vast as the damage was, the country had been until recently “run.” There had been just enough to eat. Movement had been possible. Trains had continued to arrive nightly on the east bank of the Red River where their freight had been either loaded straight into lorries for the
south and southeast or, mostly, sent across the bridge or disembarked, reembarked on pontoons, disembarked on the west bank and dispatched to the Hanoi rail head. But the trains were coming no longer.

So that in the last few months I had come to believe that the country’s endurance had reached its limit. If the appearance of the leaders at the recent National Day celebrations had been any indication, it might have been thought that they too might be coming to recognize this, in spite of the loss of political investment that negotiations might represent. But the tone and substance of some remarks by Pham Van Dong on September 3, on the other hand, were harder and less flexible than ever. And I had, until recently, to repeat my consistent impression that there was still almost nothing that the people could not be asked to do and almost no lengths to which they could not be persuaded to go, even if on their hands and knees; it was as difficult, I knew, to convey this mental climate as it was depressing to live in it. I had believed, until August, that the D.R. V. regime would pursue the conflict even if they had, like Samson, to pull the pillars down on themselves and on all of us.

The prime minister’s remarks might have reflected the D.R. V.’s position at that moment, that of an apparently cornered rat. But the corner might not have been as tight as all that; even if it were, cornered North Vietnamese rats bite. I understood on reliable authority that this was well recognized by the South Vietnamese army, who tried to allow the North Vietnamese army an escape route while hitting them with helicopter “gunships.” The U.S. Marines, on the contrary, tried to surround them and to fight it out on the ground. I did not know what political conclusion should be drawn from that military analogy: not, presumably, a conciliatory one acceptable to the United States. On the other hand, the total elimination of all the rats, as an alternative conclusion, through invasion and obliteration bombing would also be neither practicable nor politically acceptable.

The Vietnamese had risen against their masters when moral and material circumstances had demanded in the past. If their circumstances had sharply deteriorated, if the role of “victim” no longer seemed worth the sacrifice, if the equation of communism, nationalism, and the charisma of Ho Chi Minh ceased to balance, then... If the Americans continued to cut the railway lines from China and Haiphong to Hanoi and succeeded in putting the ports out of action, then, because it was now impossible to see how the D.R. V. could both pursue the war in the South and keep the North running, the maintenance of morale—let alone enthusiasm—must become as impossible. Until August, General Giap’s words during the French war to the 316th Division had probably been the key to the government’s intransigence. “The enemy will be caught in a dilemma; he has to drag out the war in order to win it and does not possess, on the other hand, the psychological and political means to fight a long-drawn-out war.” (And peace itself might also have been uninviting to the regime; payment for bloc aid, charges of betrayal of the National Liberation Front, even their own overthrow, dependence on China.) But it was not the D.R. V.’s inability to fight such a war, failing Soviet air intervention and supply, that was plain. Giap’s dictum was irrelevant. So, at last, were lorries and bicycles...
The D.R. V. in late September, when I left that unhappy country for England, was no longer capable of maintaining itself as an economic unit nor of mounting aggressive war against its neighbor. "The major war was over, in the sense that a game of chess conducted by Capablanca could actually be over in two minutes but might with a stubborn or less intelligent opponent drag on for hours without changing the final decision." It was at that moment of victory that Capablanca conceded the game.

III

The strength of the American bombing campaign of summer 1967 had rested not only on its weight but on its consistency, hour after hour, day after day. The strategy, as well as damaging or destroying—in ports, on railway lines, and on storage areas—the capacity of the D.R. V. to feed itself and to maintain invasion, had also, for the first time, allowed the North Vietnamese no time to repair war-making facilities. No sooner were they repaired than they were struck again; Tonkinese ingenuity had been defeated and, by the remorseless persistence of the campaign, their will eroded to near-extinction.

But although some spasmodic bombing in the northeast quadrant took place after September, it was on a greatly reduced scale and frequently interrupted by long periods of inactivity during "peace initiatives," all illusory if not contrived, and anyway occasions when the campaign should have maintained, even increased, momentum. Above all, that factor—the persistence of the campaign—which had sapped North Vietnamese endurance was discarded. And at the end of March 1968, all bombing of North Vietnam north of the 20th parallel was discontinued. Victory—by September 1967 in American hands—was not so much thrown away as shunned with prim, averted eyes.

Even now, this renunciation is difficult to understand. Although the prompt use of air power against the northeast quadrant in 1965 would have brought earlier victory without the damage, misery, and death to both sides caused by gradualism, the lifting of at least some constraints by Washington had brought the D.R. V. to manifest defeat by 1967.

Some have claimed that the equipment observed during the People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) Tet offensive of February 1968 demonstrated the failure of air power; but most of that equipment had been in South Vietnam or enroute there before the summer air offensive in the north had even begun.

To attribute the surrender to a failure of will among the president’s civilian advisers is to grant to those “intellectuals” a will to victory which many of them did not claim, indeed rejected. A war directed by men who believed that it should not be waged at all was not one likely to be prosecuted with vigor nor one in which the military command—whom the “intellectuals” in their arrogance despised anyway—would be permitted military decision. Nor would a war be enthusiastically pursued by men who thought that the North Vietnamese were not irredentist and aggressive Communists but put-upon nationalist Social Democrats, or that America
was not so much saving a nearly defenseless South Vietnam as "intervening militarily in the affairs of another country when U.S. vital security interests were not directly involved." Some even maintained that South Vietnam, precisely because of her weakness, merited defeat, and that her interests lay in unity with her totalitarian neighbor anyway. (Nor did the frightened "intellectual" illusion that bombing would provoke Soviet and Chinese armed intervention help the effective conduct of the war.) Nor could a war be won by men familiar with computers and academic theory but not with the battlefield or the ageless facts of Southeast Asia. Nor, above all, could it be won by men ashamed of America.

The war, nevertheless, dragged on until the Peace Agreement of 1973. Thereafter, Watergate and consequent opposition to all of Richard Nixon's policies persuaded the U.S. Congress to withhold funds and equipment from the government and army of the Republic of South Vietnam. That country, thus carelessly abandoned by her American ally, now forms part of the renamed Socialist Republic of Vietnam, the conqueror also of Laos and Cambodia. Freedom is dead throughout the peninsula. Soviet navies and air forces move freely over the South China Sea.

But the "treason of the intellectuals" ensured these consequences and ensured too that more than 50,000 Americans would not return home. The intellectuals, even confronted today by the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, the occupation of Laos, and the mass exodus from socialist Vietnam, still admit no culpability; indeed, they seek and continue to obtain posts in the government of those United States whose honor they degraded.

But despite them, the American effort in Vietnam, however, ultimately unsuccessful in the peninsula, held the line long enough to permit the secure establishment of a democratic market economy outside Indochina itself. The existence in liberty of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, the Philippines, Thailand) and the prosperity and independence of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan all spring from United States' resistance to tyranny in Vietnam. They are living monuments to the American dead in Indochina and to all those men of the United States armed forces whose presence in Vietnam gave the rest of Asia the time to grow, unharassed and at peace. The war was not in vain. Were that not so, a man from a country which, for whatever good reason, played no martial part in "America's war," would not have had the impertinence to write the story.