VII. THE BIG LIE

"Someone in Hanoi must have read Mein Kampf and The Goebbels Diaries," I called out to my office mate as I struggled through the tedious morning ritual of reading the daily transcripts of Radio Hanoi. Even though the themes seldom varied, everyone on our team scanned the copy regularly for any signs of change in Hanoi's hard line on the MIA question. The lead item was a smug attack on "Governor General Martin," Hanoi's mocking nickname for "the American neocolonialist," Ambassador Graham Martin. Martin, Hanoi insisted, should recognize the futility of his attempts to "prop up the puppet army of Nguyen Van Thieu." As usual, General Murray and the Defense Attache Office took a hit as the "control headquarters" for an alleged secret army of "20,000 illegal American military advisors."

As untrue and absurd as these allegations were, there were compelling reasons why they were a fundamental part of Hanoi's position. Certainly no American military men remained in Vietnam other than the mere handful of officers who worked out...
of the Embassy and the DAO. But the North Vietnamese knew that the Saigon government’s ties to Washington represented one of its major political weaknesses. The xenophobic South Vietnamese were responsive to claims that their president was a creature of the White House. The American military withdrawal in the wake of the Paris Agreement had left the Saigon government standing apparently alone in its opposition to North Vietnamese communism, an image that Hanoi could not allow to take hold. It was therefore a fundamental article of faith that the war was one of outside aggression (American), not a civil war caused by southern antipathy for communism. By insisting over and over that the American military and political role in the south continued, Hanoi legitimized the need for continued heavy sacrifices to eject the foreign aggressors from Vietnamese soil. Like all good propaganda, this North Vietnamese claim contained a grain of truth that made it more readily believable. Several thousand American contractor employees were assisting the South Vietnamese in the maintenance of their air force equipment, although the presence of these civilians was not a violation of the Paris Agreement, which only required a complete American military withdrawal. It was also quite true that the Thieu government depended on American aid for its existence, although it relied no more on Washington than Hanoi relied on Moscow and Peking. The charge that American contractor employees constituted General Murray’s “secret army” was a particularly ludicrous notion to anyone familiar with life in cease-fire Saigon. The contractors were a mixture of retired military men and assorted expatriates whose motives for Vietnam duty were highly questionable. Collectively, they were probably the largest group of undisciplined and over-indulgent foreigners to hit a foreign capital since the Red Army descended on Berlin in 1945. General Murray once described the life-style of Saigon’s American expatriates as “sybaritic.” Several of us had to break out a Webster Dictionary to decipher what the colorful general meant, after which we agreed that he had aptly described the beast. If the nefarious Washington war hawks were covertly maintaining troops in Vietnam, they had hardly recruited the elite of American society for the mission. Furthermore, if they planned to continue American involvement in Vietnam, then they could not have tapped a more unlikely candidate to implement this scheme. Major General Murray was a transportation officer whose combat record included service in World War II as a member of a gun crew on a merchant tanker and
later duty as a rail transport officer in Italy. An American General Giap he was not. President Nixon gave firm assurances of continuing American aid to the South Vietnamese, and it made considerable sense to assign a logistician to Saigon. Well-schooled in the techniques of getting the hardware into the hands of the troops, General Murray was the logical choice for Defense Attache unless Washington intended to perpetuate the war. Article 7(a) of the Paris Agreement permitted the one-for-one replacement of expended military equipment. General Murray’s job was to ascertain South Vietnamese needs, work out the priorities, and administer funds appropriated by Congress to keep the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces (RVNAF) in business. To accomplish this task, the General and his staff of fifty officers were augmented by 800 to 1,000 American civilians and a sizeable staff of Vietnamese employees. It was a massive undertaking, particularly since the anticipated cease-fire had not materialized. As General Murray would recall, his mission "was the first time in our history -- perhaps any history -- that we had the task, with a mere fifty military, to totally support a million alien folks in battle."

I didn’t envy General Murray his job. When the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV) furled its colors, it be-
better than anyone that logistics was the achilles heel of the rapidly improving Vietnamese military machine in 1973. His job was to compensate for this deficiency within the constraints of the Paris Agreement, which clearly forbade any further American advisory role in Vietnam. As the level of hostilities escalated, General Murray sometimes found himself uncomfortably situated directly in the line of fire between the strong-willed Ambassador Martin and his political opponents. Prime candidates for this role were congressional liberals, certain members of the press, and even Murray's own superiors in the chain of command. The general definitely occupied a no-win position when it came to a dispute between himself and the ambassador. He once related that "Ambassador Martin used to tell me that it was either him or me when we disagreed. Then he'd add that there were not too many people standing in line for his job!" The general had come to Saigon to assist in supplying the South Vietnamese military and preferred to avoid the Embassy's intrigues altogether, a desire that proved unattainable.

The feisty Murray was not one to run away from a fight. When he learned that the Department of Defense was on the verge of eliminating hostile fire pay for American military personnel in Vietnam, he dispatched an indignant message of protest to the Pentagon. In expressing his suspicion that elimination of combat pay was a political ploy to signify the termination of hostilities in Vietnam, his challenge to Washington was a classic. "Maybe it's an attempt to whitewash the inside of a coal bin," he led off. "If so, then I want to know about it." The general explained that his staff officers were sometimes unavoidably exposed to hostile fire in the performance of their duties. To cut their monthly combat pay of $65.00 was unfair and hardly deserving of attention as a cost-cutting measure since it involved a minuscule sum of money. After the general dispatched his protest to Washington, we heard no more of the move to cut hostile fire pay. Our outspoken boss had made his point.

General Murray rejected any notion that our role was to provide assistance to the South Vietnamese for the politically cynical purpose of delaying an inevitable Communist victory to save face for the Nixon administration. If he had believed that this central assumption underlay our efforts in 1973 and 1974, I am convinced that he would have resigned rather than associate himself with such a policy. By 1973, many Americans in Saigon had become disenchanted with our Vietnamese ally, but
General Murray was not one of them. A close personal friend of many of his counterparts, he identified with their cause and agonized over the limits imposed by Congress on the use of American military power in Southeast Asia. Frustrated by Congress' reluctance to continue funding the beleaguered South Vietnamese, he regarded any refusal to live up to our commitment as a unconscionable breach of trust. General Murray dreaded the chore of explaining the acts of the tight-fisted Congress to his Vietnamese counterparts and became more and more disillusioned as his Saigon tour progressed.

One day in early 1974, the general announced that he desired to address all military personnel in the DAO theater. Since he did not habitually call such gatherings, the summons triggered a wave of speculation. Had he been reassigned, or was he perhaps planning to announce his retirement? Ten minutes before the appointed hour, some seventy military men representing all four services occupied the first ten rows of the theater. As the general strode briskly to the front of the theater, his determined expression signalled that he had called the meeting to get something off his chest. After receiving assurances from his executive officer that all military men were present, the general began to speak in a calm voice:

This won't take me long, but I don't want anyone to get the idea that, because my delivery is brief, I don't mean exactly what I say. We are assigned here in Saigon to implement the policies of our Government. In all matters pertaining to this mission, the chief spokesman for our Government is Ambassador Martin -- it's his show. Any and all statements of policy released to the press must come from the Ambassador or his press officer. No one in this office, myself included, has the authority to discuss the current situation with members of the Saigon press corps without specific authorization. If the Ambassador should choose to delegate this authority to me or anyone else, then and only then will we share our opinions about the military situation. Until we receive such authorization, we will respect the fact that the sole authorized channel of communication to the press is the United States Embassy.

Recently, there have been stories appearing in the press quoting "informed American military sources" in Saigon. Now, if there are any "informed American military sources" in Saigon, they are in this theater right now. I want you all to understand that we are forbidden to communicate with the press unless specifically directed and authorized by the Embassy. If members of the press approach you for your opinion of the situation, you should refer them to the South Vietnamese military, which is carrying on without American combat forces. It is their war; let them explain it. Finally, I want you to know that, if a member of my command violates this policy and it comes to my attention, I promise you that I will lock, bolt and barricade the gates of mercy!

Having said his piece, General Murray snatched up his hat, stalked out of the theater, and left all of us with the thought expressed aloud by one colonel: "Boy what an ass chewing he must have gotten from the Ambassador!"
One thing was abundantly clear to all of us: From now on, we would be wise to avoid the company of anyone remotely connected with the press. In the event of a leak, anyone who consorted with the press would be automatically suspected. I felt certain that the general's uncharacteristic ultimatum bore the Embassy's trademark. I also interpreted his warning to mean that an indiscretion with the press could result in a one-way ticket home for the transgressor.

The public relations nerve was official Saigon's most sensitive spot. For example, the DAO Terms of Reference laid down by the Joint Chiefs of Staff created "a number of bosses," for General Murray in the chain of command and necessitated the close coordination of DAO activities with several layers of military headquarters in Thailand, Hawaii, and Washington. "I had many bosses," Murray recalls, "but not the Ambassador, with whom I was to 'cooperate and fully inform'. The one clear exception was public relations. That was placed entirely under the Ambassador by a separate message. I was to take my marching orders on public relations from him."

Relations with the media in Vietnam had been a sticky problem for as long as I could remember. Early in my tour in Nau Nghia province, the adjutant on the advisory team had warned me about the dangers of talking to reporters. Our guidance was simple -- we would not talk to a reporter unless he had a written letter of introduction from the MACV public information office. Even then, we understood that talking to the press was risky business. Everyone knew that a journalist sanctioned by MACV had quoted a district senior advisor (DSA) in our province out of context and that the candid remarks of another DSA had caused such a reaction from the Embassy in Saigon that the province senior advisor had taken the guilty officer to task for his indiscretion. Most of us would have preferred exposure to a leper rather than entrust our careers to a journalist in 1972. By the time I returned to Vietnam in 1973, I had already developed a strong sense of caution about the media.

For this reason, I was initially uneasy upon learning that the role of press officer was one of my duties. I soon learned, however, that the delegation press officer had very few contacts with the press. Virtually all dealings with the media concerning the MIA question were centralized downtown at the Embassy. I was responsible for preparing press releases on the talks for Embassy approval, and my duties required me to arrange for press conferences on those infrequent occasions.
when the Embassy approved them. I even wrote a thirty-four-page "White Book," a report to the American people on the results of the MIA talks during the first year of the cease-fire. However, the Embassy cleared neither the "White Book" nor most of our press releases for publication. Nor was I overworked in arranging press conferences for the chief. I recall only two such occasions during fifteen months on the job, both of which were arranged by the Embassy. I discovered that the Embassy's political-military affairs section consistently insulated the US delegation from the press and showed a marked reluctance to approve public relations initiatives that we suggested from time to time.

This situation became one of the most frustrating features of our job. Without strong ties to the media, we forfeited a useful weapon in our battle of wits with the Communists. In our view, the Communists were clearly responsible for the deadlocked talks, and we wanted to mount a press campaign to exploit this vulnerability. When our initiatives failed to receive the Embassy's blessing, we felt that we were missing an opportunity to saddle the Communists with responsibility for the MIA impasse. Frustrated by Communist stall tactics at the negotiation table, we sought to bludgeon them publicly for their callous behavior. The Communists had used the POW issue to their advantage during the war, and we now saw an opportunity to beat them at their own game. We also sensed that we were not adequately informing the American people of our efforts to resolve the mysteries of the missing and dead.

Part of the problem might have been the Embassy's desire to play down any remaining American military role in Vietnam. Perhaps, we joked, the Ambassador is reluctant to unleash a military officer in a room filled with reporters, particularly if the officer happened to be the outspoken Colonel Tombaugh. Even General Murray was fond of quoting a Pentagon colleague who had once quipped: "There is nothing more dangerous than a general officer at a press conference." Finally, I felt reasonably certain that the Embassy regarded the MIA issue as a volatile and sensitive sleeping dog that was best left undisturbed. Our superiors in the Embassy evidently believed that the blame for the deadlocked talks already rested at the feet of the Communists. Hence, there was no need to stir up the issue by launching a press campaign and exposing ourselves to accusations that we were playing politics with the MIA question.

One of the most enlightening and sobering features of duty
in cease-fire Saigon was the opportunity to observe the daily progress of the war of words from a box seat. At times, I felt that our crude attempts to match the North Vietnamese in the art of manipulating world opinion resembled an amateur lightweight trying to stand up to the world's heavyweight champion. No one has described Hanoi's consummate skill in this area better than Tom Wolfe:

If the United States was seriously trying to win the battle of world opinion - well, then, here you had a real bush-league operation. The North Vietnamese were the uncontested aces. . . One of the most galling things a pilot had to endure in Vietnam was seeing the North Vietnamese pull propaganda coup after propaganda coup, often with the help, unwitting or otherwise, of Americans. . . .

For example, the missions over . . . an important transportation center in the Iron Triangle area. For two days they softened the place up, working on the flak sites and SAM sites in the most methodical way. On the third day they massed the bomb strike itself. They tore the place apart. They ripped open its gullet! They put it out of the transport business. It had been a model operation. But the North Vietnamese now are blessed with a weapon that no military device known to America could ever get a lock on. As if by magic . . . in Hanoi . . . appears . . . Harrison Salisbury! Harrison Salisbury-writing in The New York Times about the atrocious American bombing of the hardscrabble folk of North Vietnam in the Iron Triangle! If you had real sporting blood in you, you had to hand it to the North Vietnamese. They were champions of this sort of thing. It was beautiful to watch. To Americans who knew the air war in the north firsthand, it seemed as if the North Vietnamese were playing Mr. Harrison Salisbury of The New York Times like an ocarina, as if they were blowing smoke up his pipe and the finger work was just right and the song was coming forth better than they could have played it themselves.

Our organization experienced Hanoi's penchant for the propaganda coup on a number of occasions, but several episodes are particularly memorable. For example, shortly after the cease-fire, the US Air Force commenced weekly liaison flights to Hanoi to carry representatives of all four JMT delegations from Saigon to the North Vietnamese capital. The purpose of the flights was to allow the North Vietnamese delegation to coordinate directly with its government to facilitate the exchange of MIA information. For the first several trips, the members of the C-130 crew wore their flight suits on guided tours hosted by the North Vietnamese. During these tours, our hosts obligingly provided an opportunity for us to purchase souvenirs, the most popular of which were metal combs engraved with Chairman Ho Chi Minh's credo -- "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom." Engraved in Vietnamese on the opposite side of the combs appeared the words "Wreck of the 4000th American aircraft," Hanoi's smug boast that the combs were made from melted parts of our fallen jets.

The North Vietnamese then suddenly announced that the Air Force crews should change into civilian clothes prior to dis-
embarking from their aircraft. The official explanation was that the sight of American pilots in flight suits "enraged and infuriated" the citizens of Hanoi, who recalled the "brutal carpet bombing of their city by the US Air Force." Since the North Vietnamese were the hosts and could call the shots for the Hanoi trip, the Air Force complied with this request. Some months later, on one of my trips to the North Vietnamese capital, an employee of the Hoa Binh Hotel told me that our crews had "refused to wear their uniforms into the capital" because "they were ashamed of their air piracy" and afraid of "Hanoi's outraged citizens." After demanding that the crews wear civvies, the Communists had apparently told their people that the Americans themselves had made the decision to wear civilian clothes.

After a year of negotiations, Hanoi finally agreed to repatriate the remains of twenty-three American prisoners who had died in their POW camps (it was later confirmed that some had died from torture inflicted by their captors.) In negotiating the specific arrangements for returning the remains, the Communists stipulated that the repatriation ceremony would be held at Gia Lam airport where they had released our POWs in 1973. The North Vietnamese insisted that no members of the Saigon press corps would be permitted to attend the ceremony, and we accepted this condition since we had no desire to turn the occasion into a public relations circus. When the long-awaited day arrived, our team of negotiators arrived at Gia Lam and discovered that the Communists had invited more than 100 members of the Hanoi press corps to cover their "humane gesture." As the army of Communist-bloc and leftist reporters recorded the events, a North Vietnamese spokesman read a lengthy prepared statement in which he lauded Hanoi's act as concrete proof that his government was "scrupulously implementing" the Paris Agreement. Of course, he never mentioned the fact that the Communists had taken more than a year to repatriate the remains. Nor did he mention Hanoi's rejection of our request to repatriate the remains of an unidentified twenty-fourth American discovered by our negotiators during an earlier visit to a Hanoi cemetery. The North Vietnamese argued that this American had been found dead in the wreckage of his aircraft. Since he had technically not died in captivity, the repatriation of his remains would require separate negotiations. Subsequent attempts to secure Hanoi's agreement to discuss this case met with repeated failure. The remains of the man we dubbed the "twenty-fourth American"
never left Hanoi.

The Communist military delegation at Camp Davis held a press conference every Saturday morning at ten o'clock. It was the only regular show in town, and the press could always rely on senior Communist spokesman, Colonel Vo Dong Giang, for copy. Not surprisingly, the briefings were fairly well attended by the news-hungry Saigon press corps. As press officer for the US delegation, I routinely sent my Vietnamese press assistant to cover these sessions. Monday mornings in the office were usually traumatic as she reported her anger and frustration at Communist audacity. It was not uncommon for the Vietcong spokesman to bombard the press with hostile propaganda, even to the point of calling for President Thieu's overthrow, right in the South Vietnamese capital. At the conclusion of each session, the obliging Communists posed for pictures and distributed transcripts of their statements to assist the press in accurate quotations of their positions.

Under such circumstances, we needed all the help we could get in our efforts to counter Hanoi's finely tuned propaganda machine. Such help certainly included good relations with the press. Unfortunately, this was not always the case. The legacy of mutual distrust and misunderstanding that developed during the war continued to haunt us during the cease-fire period. Six months on the Joint Military Team had convinced me that my wartime hostility toward the press was unhealthy. Much of our difficulty stemmed from a tendency toward oversensitive reactions to criticisms often implied in questions from inquisitive reporters. In defense of the press, I believe that the vast majority of journalists endeavored to maintain professional and objective attitudes toward our problems as we struggled to find the "light at the end of the tunnel."

It is easy to understand how the glaring discrepancy between American optimism at the end of 1967 and the sudden explosion of South Vietnam's cities during Tet of 1968 had triggered skepticism and undermined official Saigon's credibility. The tragedy of the resulting mutual distrust was that the press and the military tended to perceive each other in extreme terms. Just as I had left Vietnam in 1972 convinced that the press corps was dedicated to discrediting our efforts in Vietnam, a regrettably large number of reporters likewise concluded from our defensive posture toward them that we had something to hide. If we were unfair in questioning the loyalty and professionalism of the press because reporters asked tough questions that often exposed our weaknesses, the press was equally unfair when it
accused the military of pursuing a policy of deliberate deceit. To be sure, the repeated optimistic predictions of progress invited suspicion, and, to make matters worse, some incidents of deliberate misstatements quite clearly occurred. Still, the press and the American people never quite understood that much of the optimistic reporting resulted from inadequate understanding of the forces at work and not from some coordinated and sinister plot to hide the truth. In other words, the Americans who made false assessments and predictions based on naivete and misinterpretation of reality vastly outnumbered those who made misstatements grounded in malice and deceit.

Unfortunately, we never succeeded in completely penetrating the barriers between ourselves and the press in Saigon. Thus, as press officer for the US delegation, I found myself in the absurd position of physically avoiding the members of the Saigon press corps as the military situation deteriorated and they began to dig for sources. I am certain that Jim Markham of The New York Times recalls his attempts in March 1975 to pump me for information during our noontime swim at the DAO pool. I would swim my laps around the pool and then seek out a cabana on which to recover. Jim would invariably flop down beside me and commence his interrogation. I knew from his informed questions on the snowballing disaster underway in Hue and Danang that he had pieced together an accurate picture of what was happening. On a couple of occasions, I swore that his sources were better than mine! Even though I knew that Jim was a responsible reporter, I dared not confirm the accuracy of his efforts, lest I be identified as "an informed American military source in Saigon." My only recourse was to squirm and play dumb and thereby contribute to the distrust that had already done so much harm.

Looking back now, I can see that the whole problem was stupid and avoidable. Locked as we were in a war of words with the grand masters of opinion manipulation, we desperately needed a relationship of mutual trust with the press. In Saigon, our reluctance to deal regularly and openly with the media ignored the fundamental tenet that journalists must produce copy for their editors. If adequate copy cannot be obtained from authoritative sources, reporters will invariably obtain it elsewhere.
VIII. HANOI

"Hanoi is truly beautiful, Dai Uy. In the middle of the city lies the Hoan Kiem Lake, with a temple in the middle. You would really like it!" The speaker was one of the North Vietnamese POWs I had interrogated during the war, and his nostalgic memories of North Vietnam were typical of the many NVA soldiers I had encountered during my first tour in Vietnam. I never thought at the time that I would have the opportunity to visit Hanoi, but here I was on the verge of my first trip to the city I had heard so much about.

It was a unique opportunity for an Army officer whose specialty was Southeast Asia. I had pursued the job on the Joint Military Team for a number of reasons, but the prospect of travel to Hanoi had been a key factor in my decision. Hanoi had been a "denied area" ever since the legendary Colonel Lansdale's team of saboteurs evacuated the city with the defeated French in 1954. Since then, few American military men had visited the city except as prisoners of the Hanoi government.

I had always been intrigued by the ability of the Hanoi government to mobilize its population to accept the horrendous sacrifices of their protracted struggle for national unification. During the war, I had found it impossible to ignore the tenacious bravery of the NVA regulars whom we encountered in my province. Hanoi's troops had seldom surrendered unless they were wounded or out of ammunition. During interrogation, they exhibited a firm belief in the justice of the war against what they had been told was foreign aggression. The initial interrogation was always difficult. Convinced that they were about to be tortured and executed, my sullen sources would invariably clam up and stoically await their fate. Only after I had undermined their defenses with humane treatment would they open up. When they did begin to talk, they told of their deep admiration for Ho Chi Minh and their pride in their country. I learned that many of them had volunteered for the army because they believed it was their "solemn obligation" to assist in liberating their southern cousins from American oppression. Raised from infancy to believe in the credo of Ho Chi Minh, pliable young North Vietnamese soldiers were easily convinced by their political officers that the South Vietnamese people were brutally enslaved by the Americans -- the same Americans...
who bombed their villages in the north. As one North Viet­
namese POW told me, "When the commandant of the training
center asked us who would volunteer to go south and strike
the Americans, we were all caught up by the emotion of the
moment. We felt very patriotic and raised our hands to the
man. Some even went to the local tattoo parlors and had
the words, 'Go south and kill the Americans,' inscribed on
their chests."

Such intense feelings of regional pride were not confined
to our NVA adversaries. One could also sense it among the
native North Vietnamese who comprised a large proportion of
the South Vietnamese officer corps. Deep pride in the customs,
culture, and beauty of their northern homeland was a part of
being North Vietnamese, even among those who had fled south
rather than live under Ho’s communism after the division of
the country under the 1954 Geneva Accords. My northern friends
proudly explained to me that, until 1954, the north had been
the home of the educated elite of Vietnamese society. They
reminded me that I must learn Hanoi dialect if I expected to
speak correct Vietnamese. Large numbers of the Western-oriented
North Vietnamese had accepted French Catholicism. Their fami-
lies were tightly knit, thrifty, and hard-working. As one

of my northern friends explained: "We never had any choice
but to work hard in the north. The climate was cold; the
soil less fertile; and the rivers less controllable than in
the south. The aggressive, almost Western approach to life
and its problems seen among us northerners derives from our
upbringing under these conditions. We had to be strong."

Not surprisingly, the South Vietnamese saw their northern
neighbors somewhat differently. Just as the northerner tended
to look down on his southern brethren as lazy, shiftless
country folk given to drinking, gambling, and free spending,
the southerner held an equally unflattering opinion of the
northerner. My southern friends insisted that the North Viet­
namese were arrogant, tight-fisted, and untrustworthy. North­
erners were infected with a superiority complex that made
them pushy and uncompromising. If I married a northern girl,
my southern friends counseled, she would save all my money,
but I would live on spinach and water lilies as she nagged and
bullied me into an early grave. My North Vietnamese acquaint-
ances scoffed at such insults and warned that anyone unfortu-
nate enough to select a southern girl for a wife would labor
all his life merely to keep ahead of her spending habits. As
proof of northern superiority, they pointed proudly to the fact
that most of them had fled the north in 1954 with little more than the shirts on their backs. Now, a scant twenty years later, northerners comprised a disproportionately large segment of South Vietnam's economic, political, and military leadership. A poor North Vietnamese family was indeed a rarity. Undisciplined and uneducated northern children were rarer still.

As an American, I found the north-south rivalry amusing but also valid. I had long noticed that native North Vietnamese officers in the South Vietnamese military were usually more direct and aggressive in their approach to problem-solving. In contrast, southerners seemed less inclined to a frontal attack on daily problems. Southerners seemed to approach life in the deliberate and patient fashion that our instructors at Ft. Bragg had ascribed to all Vietnamese during our advisory training. The southerner’s approach to any endeavor usually incorporated the key principle that “tomorrow’s another day,” a propensity that caused no end of frustration for countless impatient American advisors over the years. Anyone with the ability to differentiate became quickly aware that many of the more effective officers in the South Vietnamese military were of northern origins. Not only were northerners more problem-oriented, but, for obvious reasons, they were more strongly anti-Communist in their outlook. Thus, I turned a deaf ear to the insistence of one well-educated, Hanoi-born officer who tried to convince me that the north-south distinction was a fiction fostered by the French as a part of their colonial philosophy of “divide and rule.” Even though the Paris Agreement reaffirmed the unity of Vietnam, many fundamental differences existed between north and south over and above the fact that the two sides disagreed ideologically. I had already seen the results of twenty years of American-backed “nation-building” in the south. A trip to Hanoi would give me the chance to see what the North Vietnamese had done with their part of the country since the Geneva Accords.

We were airborne in a lumbering C-130 over the South China Sea -- Hanoi bound; estimated flight time from Saigon to the Communist capital was less than four hours. I wondered if any of the North Vietnamese officers seated across from me had trudged for 100 days to the battlefields of the south down the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Our aircraft had departed Saigon at eight that morning. Prior to takeoff, the Americans and South Vietnamese had settled on the port side of the plane, and the Communists had taken their seats on the opposite side. From the
absence of traffic between the two sides, one would have thought that a minefield divided the passenger compartment. I hadn’t expected a carnival atmosphere, but I was not prepared for the sullen stares of the Vietnamese passengers when I boarded the aircraft. Part of the problem was that we had departed a day late. One of the motors had refused to start the previous morning, and this was our second attempt at the flight. The pre-flight documentation checks required of the Communists by the South Vietnamese also contributed to the tension on board. The curt South Vietnamese MPs and policemen made no attempt to disguise their feelings as they scrutinized ID documents and forced each Communist delegate to pose for mug shots on the tarmac. Later that night, they would again subject each Communist passenger to this drill as they disembarked the aircraft. The South Vietnamese deeply resented the legalized presence of Communist military personnel in Saigon and missed no opportunity to remind their adversaries that they were not welcome in Saigon. We had forced the South Vietnamese to accept the terms of the Paris Agreement, but they were not obligated to like the results.

Before the plane took off, all passengers received a safety briefing that had been a feature of the Hanoi flights ever since a little-publicized incident in June 1973. At that time, an incendiary device in a Communist officer’s attache case had accidentally detonated on board the C-130 as it flew over the South China Sea. Several passengers had been burned before the resulting fire could be extinguished. It had been a close call, apparently caused by a Communist courier’s inept handling of some sort of security destruct device. Our government had reacted by cancelling the weekly flights until the Communists provided written assurance that they would comply with Air Force safety procedures.

Ignoring the quizzical looks of the South Vietnamese delegates, I crossed the “no-man’s land” shortly after takeoff and took a seat between Major Tien and Sergeant Ha, two members of the Hanoi delegation. Since the actual negotiating sessions provided little opportunity to meet our counterparts, the Hanoi flights posed the best chance to talk with the Communists. I had thought it over the night before and had decided that I would not allow shyness or a hard-line attitude to mar this opportunity.

Major Tien wore an ill-fitting khaki tunic adorned with scarlet and gold collar tabs. His olive drab pith helmet hung on the bulkhead behind him. Except for the collar tabs, the only
insignia on his uniform was what we jokingly called a "Ho Chi Minh Good Conduct Badge," a small red and gold pin depicting the profile of Chairman Ho affixed over his right breast pocket. I guessed that the major was approximately fifty-five years old. His hair was graying, and crow's feet had appeared at the corners of his almond-shaped eyes. Tien extended his hand and greeted me with a thin smile.

"Chao, Dai Uy. Dai Uy co khoe khong?" ("Hello, Captain. Are you feeling well?")

"Da, cam on Thieu ta. Toi khoa lam. Con Thieu ta, thi sao?" ("I'm fine, thank you, Major. How about you?")

Our greeting lasted several more minutes as the major asked me the same battery of personal questions that most Westerners would regard as a bit nosey. How old was I? Did I have a wife yet? Any children? How long had I studied Vietnamese, and how long had I been in Vietnam? I had been pumped in a similar manner by hundreds of curious Vietnamese during the past three years, but, coming from Major Tien, the questions made me a little uneasy. Don't make it too easy for them to do your dossier, I cautioned myself -- make them work for it. The major soon steered our conversation to the war and made no attempt to be diplomatic.
Major Tien, the hard-liner, stands in center. At right is USAF Lt Col Gerald Edwards. Photo taken outside Base Operations building, Tan Son Nhut.

Arrival in Hanoi. The main terminal building at Gia Lam Airport.
"Dai Uy, tell me something. You are an educated man. Why did the Americans come to our country, intervene in our affairs, cause so much destruction, and kill so many people? Surely you know about what happened at My Lai and elsewhere in our land."

"Major," I replied, "let me ask you a question. Is it not a policy of your government that soldiers must stay close to the people and treat them well?"

The major nodded his agreement. On my right, the baby-faced Sergeant Ha leaned closer so that he could understand my accented Vietnamese.

"There, you see, Thieu ta. That's exactly what our soldiers are taught. Our policy is the same as yours. But, sometimes, mistakes can be made at a lower level. Surely you would agree that a lower-level cadre might make a mistake and disobey your government's policy?"

"No, Dai Uy," replied Tien with a shake of his head. "Such a thing is possible, but not in our army. No cadre would ever make such a mistake. The policy is clear and understood by all. These are our people. Nothing like My Lai could ever be committed by liberation forces."

I've got you now, I thought to myself. "In that case, Major, you must explain to me why your troops massacred thousands of civilians in Hue during the 1968 Tet Offensive." I glanced triumphantly at Sergeant Ha, who by now was almost sitting in my lap as he strained to monitor the debate over the drone of the engines.

"Dai Uy," Tien responded with a glare, "the thousands of innocent civilians killed during the general uprising in the cities of South Vietnam in 1968 were killed in the crossfire of the battles -- mostly by the massive firepower of the American military. Our liberation forces scrupulously heeded their orders to protect civilian lives and property."

"But surely, Thieu ta, you cannot deny that the bodies of several thousand citizens of Hue found by our forces in mass graves outside the city had been executed and buried by your forces. People whose hands had been tied behind their backs certainly weren't killed in any crossfire. I think that some of your local commanders got carried away there the same as Lieutenant Calley at My Lai."

The old major's jaw was set now. "Dai Uy, the only citizens executed at Hue were convicted by liberation courts of treason. Such courts administered revolutionary justice according to law, and your claim of thousands of victims of our forces is incorrect. All our commanders know the correct policy and adhere to it."
Such excesses may be possible in your army, but never in ours. You have listened too much to your government's propaganda."

Even though our conversation was leading nowhere, I was intrigued at the way the major handled himself. The stubborn old revolutionary was not about to let his guard down and openly discuss the conduct of "liberation forces." It occurred to me that he actually believed what he was saying. After all, unless he had been an eyewitness to the Hue slaughter or had spoken to one, it was hardly likely that he would have read about these excesses in "People's Army," the North Vietnamese Army newspaper. Still, I found it difficult to accept the idea that he could believe so firmly in the total discipline of his forces in combat, particularly if he were a combat veteran himself. I was more inclined to interpret his intransigence as a disciplined determination to yield nothing to an American adversary, particularly in front of Sergeant Ha, who had clung to every word of our exchange.

Major Tien signalled a truce by slumping back in his chair and closing his eyes, his fascination with the new American officer clearly at an end for the moment. He had probably decided that, except for my language capability, I was impudent and arrogant like other Americans. How could I dare to criticize liberation forces when my own country's military had come thousands of miles to intervene in a nation where it had no business in the first place?

Tired of political rhetoric, I turned to the bright-faced Sergeant Ha. He was a security guard who wore a Chinese K-54 pistol discreetly hidden by his tunic. His job was to guard the North Vietnamese cargo during loading and unloading. (Like the baggage of the passengers themselves, Communist cargo was diplomatically immune from search.) Unlike the dogmatic Major Tien, Sergeant Ha turned out to be a pleasant traveling companion. He had entered the army at the age of twenty-three, before which he had been a student with a draft deferment. A newlywed, Ha was a native of Hanoi, where his wife was pregnant with their first child. The young sergeant was in good spirits, and more interested in talking about his hopes for a son than in proving his ideological purity in a political debate.

Sergeant Ha spotted a book I was carrying and asked me what it was about.

The book was Colonel Robinson Risner's, *The Passing of the Night*, which Louise LeTendre, our DAO Command Librarian, had given me the night before. When I began to explain that it was an American POW's account of life in a Hanoi prison, Major Tien
came to life.

"I've heard about this book, Dai Uy. Surely you must know that it is a slander against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Our policy was one of leniency toward captured personnel."

I had read enough accounts of Hanoi's "leniency" to know better, but I decided to go one more round with the major anyway. I was intrigued by his ideological rigidity. "Thieu ta, I don't believe it was your government's policy to torture prisoners (like hell I don't!), but, in war, people sometimes become emotionally involved and do regrettable things. After all, the American pilots captured by your people had just attacked your country. Under such circumstances, I can understand why Colonel Risner and other POWs were not welcomed as honored guests to Hanoi and why some of your interrogators mistreated them."

Tien shook his head. "No, Dai Uy, you still don't understand -- no officer would dare to strike a POW. We are trained to explain to them the facts about the war and to make them understand that they were tools of their government in its dark scheme to perpetuate colonial rule of our country. Even progressive Americans like Jane Fonda and Ramsey Clark have visited our POW camps and verified our humane treatment of prisoners."

You cannot believe the lies of a man like Colonel Risner."

By now, I had played my experiment to the end of its usefulness. I had deliberately challenged the major several times to speak openly -- to abandon his plug-in answers and discuss the problems of wartime ethics and conduct. He simply would not take the bait. The dogmatic old veteran either could not, or simply would not, let his guard down and accept my challenge to a free exchange of views. Or did he perhaps consider that we had indeed engaged in such an exchange? Was he, to use General Murray's description, "not lying, but transmitting lies?" -- or was he afraid of the consequences if he yielded a single point to me and I reported his words to my superiors? In any event, I had gained some insight into the mentality of our adversaries from our encounter. Dealing with the likes of Major Tien was far more challenging than extracting information from frightened and malleable NVA POWs and defectors.

I retreated to the other side of the aircraft and amused myself by watching détente in action. While I jousted with Major Tien, Vietcong Major Phuong Nam had ventured across the aircraft to establish his superiority in Chinese chess. I snapped a picture of the drama as the portly Vietcong beat
Master Sergeant Bill Herron for the third time. When they saw my camera, several of the other Communist delegates began to signal me from their seats across the plane. Their gestures told me that they wanted their pictures taken, and, for the next ten minutes, we passed the camera around and took pictures of one another while the stone-faced Major Tien looked on disapprovingly.

Hanoi's Gia Lam Airport was my first real glimpse of North Vietnam. As we landed and taxied past the rows of Soviet-built helicopters and World War II vintage aircraft, I caught sight of the pale green stucco terminal building, almost totally deserted and festooned with a dozen or more red flags. Over the main door hung a scarlet and gold banner proclaiming "Hearty Welcome to the Delegations of International Women Arriving to participate in the Fourth Vietnam Women's Convention." A small welcoming party stood on the tarmac in front of the building a few feet from the spot where our POWs had been repatriated. Led by a major named Huyen, the reception committee was all smiles as we descended from the aircraft. Accompanying the major was a bushy-browed second lieutenant who served as interpreter. A former American POW later identified the lieutenant as a guard known by the POWs as the "Mexican" because of his swarthy appearance. Another lieutenant, a civilian in a blue suit, and a photographer joined our party as we sipped tea in a small alcove of the main terminal. While the photographer hovered around our party and clicked away as if he owned stock in Eastman Kodak, the civilian introduced himself as Mr. Quang, a member of the "Committee on Receiving Foreign Visitors" from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

A smiling Major Huyen announced the day's itinerary, which included a visit to the National Art Museum and lunch at the Hoa Binh Hotel, where we would be given the opportunity to purchase souvenirs. After what he described as a "typical Vietnamese meal" (an eight-course extravaganza), we would return to the airport for a final opportunity to purchase North Vietnamese handicrafts before departing for Saigon.

As the interpreter repeated the itinerary in English for the other members of our party, I took a few pictures of my own. I was growing anxious to be done with the small talk and head for downtown Hanoi. During his briefing, Major Huyen had warned us that we would not be permitted to take outdoor pictures of Hanoi. Our hosts had adopted this rule after the Saigon government had used pictures of downtown Hanoi in a
Outside the "Museum of the Revolution" in Hanoi, the Communists proudly displayed part of the wreckage of a downed B-52.

North Vietnamese Sergeant Ha, who was more interested in his pregnant wife in Hanoi than in proving his ideological purity by debating an American.
book depicting the austerity of life under communism. I therefore had to depend on my eyes and my memory for a lasting picture of what lay ahead. I hoped that the bus would move slowly to allow more time for me to absorb a mental picture of the city. To preserve my impressions, I had arranged with Louise LeTendre for a taping session immediately upon my return to Saigon. Our bargain included Louise's pledge to provide supper in exchange for my promise to tape an account of my day in Hanoi.

When our welcome briefing finally ended, we boarded an old red and white bus and pulled out of the terminal area. On our left, the long barrels of a battery of antiaircraft guns protruded from their emplacements. Within a few minutes, we were rolling slowly down the main street of Gia Lam, a small village that lies directly across the river from Hanoi itself. Off to our right lay the twisted remains of the Gia Lam railroad yards, still unrepaired thirteen months after the end of the bombing. An old steam locomotive lay on its side, its body pockmarked with hundreds of gaping holes from the exploding bombs. Interestingly enough, small shops and shanties directly across the street stood untouched, convincing evidence of the "surgical bombing" skills of our Air Force pilots. A large blue sign with an arrow indicated "Hanoi" to the right, and I experienced a moment of apprehension. I was venturing in uniform into a city that our B-52s had heavily bombed just before the signing of the Paris Agreement. The rail yards are just the beginning, I thought, as our bus wound its way up to the approach ramp to the Paul Doumer Bridge. Beside the ramp, a huge crater had been blown in the earth by the near miss of what Major Huyen smugly described as a "stupid smart bomb." The crater was full of water and a group of half-naked children were seine-fishing in the murky pool. The US Air Force had dropped spans of the Doumer Bridge several times during the war, but Major Huyen boasted that "the people" had rebuilt it the last time in forty-four days.

I knew that we had dropped more bomb tonnage on North Vietnam than the total tonnage dropped in both theaters in World War II, and I clearly recalled the international outrage generated by the "Linebacker II" raids at the end of the war. I was thus prepared for the worst when we entered downtown Hanoi. While serving in West Berlin in the late sixties, I had seen photographs of the damage wrought on Hitler's capital by strategic bombing. Some of the ruins in Berlin's Tiergarten still stood, more than two decades after the end of the war. I felt certain
that Hanoi would still be a shattered city only a little more than a year after the cease-fire.

What I saw as our bus crossed the Red River and turned down Dien Bien Phu Boulevard came as a sobering revelation. I realized with a shock that the United States had been faked right out of our shoes — by Hanoi's unequalled command of the art of manipulating world opinion. Instead of a sea of chimneys amid mountains of rubble, I saw a city that was largely intact, with only occasional evidence of destruction or rebuilding. Hanoi was clearly no Berlin, Tokyo, or Dresden. It had not, by any stretch of the imagination, been "carpet bombed," despite the claims of the DRV's Ministry of Information that had achieved almost world-wide acceptance.* The stucco buildings in the center of the city were much as I imagined Graham Greene would have remembered them, and most of the bombs that had fallen on the downtown area had obviously been aimed at the giant iron bridge. I almost laughed aloud when I realized that the DRV's propaganda had flimflammed me into swallowing the

* I wasn't the only one taken in by Hanoi's propaganda. World opinion convicted the US Air Force of carpet bombing Hanoi on extremely meager evidence, but the myth has been impossible to kill. I recently read the memoirs of a man no less educated than George Ball, who repeatedly decries the Nixon administration's "brutal carpet bombing" of Hanoi.

Our Air Force had indeed struck virtually every military target in and around the capital, but, as will happen in war, these operations were not always completely accurate. Accidents had regrettably occurred. The most widely publicized incident was the sad fate of the Bach Mai Dispensary, which had the misfortune to lie across the street from the Bach Mai military airfield and the Bach Mai petroleum storage depot. But, if Bach Mai had been costly to the North Vietnamese in terms of innocent lives, it had been doubly costly to the United States. Hanoi's Ministry of Information had milked the incident to the ultimate. Every foreign traveler or journalist who visited North Vietnam received a complimentary trip to Bach Mai to witness concrete proof of American brutality. Once again, the North Vietnamese managed to turn the tables on us and literally snatched victory from the jaws of defeat. Hanoi convinced the world that the Christmas bombings unleashed by Washington represented an indiscriminate campaign of terror against civilians when, in fact, the "Linebacker" operations were restrained and limited in comparison with the bombings of World War II and the
Korean War.* As tragic as were the civilian deaths inadvertently caused by these operations, they were nothing compared with the deaths that could have resulted if the US Air Force had bombed Hanoi indiscriminately as charged by the North Vietnamese. In fact, the Christmas bombings of Hanoi were probably a testament to American progress in the technology of aerial bombardment since World War II, as callous as this may seem. As I rode up and down the streets of Hanoi, I found it almost inconceivable that we could have dropped so much ordnance in and around that city and still left it virtually intact.

When I expressed my astonishment at the absence of bomb damage to Major Huyen, he insisted stubbornly that "the people have completely rebuilt the city." I knew that this was an almost total fabrication unless the citizens of Hanoi had rebuilt everything and aged it sixty or seventy years at the same time. I could readily identify those structures near the bridge and elsewhere that had been or were being rebuilt. I saw nothing during this visit or subsequent visits to support Major Huyen's repeated insistence that our Air Force had indiscriminately bombed populated areas in Hanoi.

On the contrary, the evidence showed that the North Vietnamese were well aware of our bombing accuracy and of our pilots' targeting restrictions. Good examples were the famous Red River dikes, which world opinion tried and convicted our Air Force of bombing. The Hanoi government quickly recognized that we were deliberately sparing the dikes and even emplaced mobile antiaircraft batteries in their shadow where they would be safe from attack. In still another show of respect for the accuracy of the alleged "indiscriminate" bombing, cowering citizens of Hanoi filled the streets outside Hoa Lo Prison during the Christmas bombing raids. The Hanoi population knew that the raiding B-52s could and would avoid bombing our own captured aviators.

Perhaps one of the most memorable features of the face of Hanoi was its cold austerity. As I gazed out the window of the bus at what North Vietnamese POWs had called "the great socialist rear base," I felt a sense of total disbelief that this was the nerve center of our courageous and determined enemy. The Saigon I had left that morning was a montage of colors, fast-moving vehicles, crowds of shoppers, and the

*For a scholarly treatment of many of the myths and realities of the Vietnam War, see Gunter Levy's excellent study, America In Vietnam. Levy discusses the myth of Christmas "carpet bombings" in detail.
mixed sounds of Western and Vietnamese music blaring from the stands of sidewalk vendors. Hanoi could not have been any more different. Saigon was a festive place for thousands of prosperous Westerners who kept it humming with daily injections of hard currency. In Hanoi, I saw nothing but Vietnamese faces. The atmosphere in Saigon was much like Hong Kong -- crowded streets lined with overflowing shops, fine restaurants, and art dealers. Indian and Chinese merchants dominated the gold shops and custom tailor businesses, and the black-tressed beauties of the South Vietnamese capital had a charm unequalled in the orient. After living in Saigon for the past six months, I could not have been more jolted by the face of Hanoi.

Austere is not really the best term to describe what I saw that day. A better description would perhaps be a combination of drab, run-down, and depressing. As the bus rolled down the tree-shaded boulevards, I had the feeling that I was in a formerly attractive neighborhood that had been "let go" by its residents. Hanoi was a city of cream-colored stucco buildings with dark green shutters and red tile roofs. The paint had long since begun to peel from its colonial buildings, which were often almost completely hidden by the branches of the shade trees that the French had planted everywhere. The municipal streetcar network that crisscrossed the center of town still functioned, but, unlike Saigon, Hanoi was a quiet place. Peasants and city dwellers alike were dressed in ill-fitting clothes of black, brown, and blue cotton, and they moved about the city on foot and by bicycle. Here and there, the olive drab tunics and pith helmets of soldiers on leave and the mustard-colored uniforms of the public security police stood out in the crowd. Strange looking carts equipped with balloon tires and pulled by plodding oxen moved undisturbed through the heart of the city. Almost no motor vehicles were visible except for the inevitable gray government lorries and occasional buses crammed to overflowing with passengers. The transportation shortage was evident from the overloaded buses and the fact that the drivers were invariably using the few Russian-built army jeeps to transport their families.

Saigon literally teemed with humanity -- not so Hanoi. I saw only a few shops, although I did spot a free market in an alley off the main street where a large crowd of dark-clad peasant women crouched over a long row of produce baskets and haggled over the goods as Vietnamese are wont to do. Across the
street was another group of people queued up outside a building labeled "Hoc Tap Xa," a government food cooperative. The longer I looked, the more I realized that there were almost no young people on Hanoi's streets. An inveterate girl-watcher, I noted that the population consisted almost exclusively of the very old or the very young. Everywhere I looked, I saw elderly people, usually tending small children. With the exception of the baggy-trousered soldiers on leave, I spotted almost no one of either sex in their twenties, thirties or forties.

By the time I boarded the C-130 for the return flight to Saigon, I had spent less than six hours on the ground in Hanoi. Only six short hours, but what I had seen and what I had not seen left an indelible imprint on my mind. Hanoi had indeed reminded me of Berlin, but not the Berlin of 1945. Instead, the stark colorless austerity recalled the streets of East Berlin and the East German city of Magdeburg, both of which I had glimpsed during my tour in Germany. There was something distinctly similar about the contrast between East and West Berlin and between Saigon and Hanoi. In West Berlin and Saigon, one was surrounded by relative prosperity and a sense of vibrancy, whereas East Berlin and Hanoi mirrored austerity and the feeling that the people were struggling for a fulfilling life in spite of the system. As I glanced out the window of the bus at the Gia Lam peasants hunched against the fifty-degree March chill, I thought of the lush, tropical warmth of South Vietnam and remembered what my North Vietnamese friends had told me of the hard life in the north. Now I could fully understand their descriptions of the toils of life in the Red River Delta. I could also understand why the Communists so strongly desired to reunify the country under their control. Ho Chi Minh had unquestionably settled for the poorer half of the country in 1954.

The face of Hanoi told me better than anything else how much the Communists had paid for their stubborn prosecution of the war in the south. The run-down buildings and the almost total absence of any signs of a consumer economy were grim reminders of the sacrifices endured by the unfortunate twenty-four million North Vietnamese in the name of Ho Chi Minh's dream of one socialist Vietnamese state. Even Major Huyen had candidly admitted, "We spend our national wealth on the overriding problem of national defense and have nothing left over to paint buildings or invest in luxuries."
What an irony that the hapless North Vietnamese population had been kept in a state of almost continuous mobilization on behalf of liberating their southern cousins when they probably needed liberation more than anyone else. Yet, driven by Chairman Ho’s assurances of ultimate victory and unhindered by organized domestic opposition, the Hanoi government persisted in its remarkably successful campaign to sell the justice of the war to its citizens and to the world. “We will succeed in unifying our country,” Major Huyen insisted, “because the current division of the Vietnamese people is unnatural. We threw off the Chinese yoke after 1,000 years and defeated the French after 100 years. So you see, your country’s ten-year attempt to dominate our people is nothing to us. Once your government faces this reality and ceases its attempts to control our people, there is no reason why we cannot be friends. After all, Chairman Ho was so inspired by American democracy that he quoted your Declaration of Independence in our Proclamation of Independence from the French. So you see, Dai Uy, we really have much in common.”

Scant hours after this conversation, I was sipping a gin and tonic in Louise LeTendre’s apartment in Saigon. While Louise created one of her culinary triumphs, I reflected on Major Huyen’s words and on the sobering realization that the citizens of the backward city I had just visited had successfully supported an almost continuous war since 1946. I told Louise that Hanoi was definitely not impressive when measured against American standards of affluence and materialism. Yet, as our aircraft had winged its way back to the comforts of Saigon, I was forced to admit that I had been impressed in a different way. I had seen for myself the source of strength for the hundreds of thousands of NVA regulars who had walked for more than a hundred days down the infiltration trails to face the overwhelming firepower of the American military. I was now completely certain that the struggle would never go away as long as North Vietnam was ruled by men who carried the torch passed by Ho Chi Minh. Ho was their strength, even though he had been dead since 1969. His image and words were omnipresent in Hanoi. Ho dominated North Vietnam just as his alabaster statue dominated the foyer of Hanoi’s National Art Museum. At least half of the paintings in the museum depicted Ho the gentle leader, talking to the peasantry, teaching the children, or urging young soldiers on to battle. His exhortation, “Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom” was emblazoned
over doorways and on billboards throughout the city. "Bac Ho" (Uncle Ho) was the source of inspiration for North Vietnamese society, and the government played up his memory as the source of its legitimacy. Ho had become a true populist deity who was the subject of songs and folklore heard by North Vietnamese young people for twenty years. Ho had told his people that the Vietnamese struggle against the United States was like the struggle between the elephant and the mouse: The smaller combatant with the will to win would inevitably triumph when its adversary tired.

Shortly after the signing of the Paris Agreement, workers erected a large billboard near the center of Hanoi. It was dominated by a heroic caricature of a Vietnamese soldier standing triumphantly astride the wreckage of a fallen American jet. "Hearty Congratulations to the Resistance of the Entire Vietnamese People," the caption read. "We have Defeated the Americans and Saved the Country!" Now, with the Americans almost out of the picture, one could easily understand why the single-minded Hanoi government viewed Uncle Ho's cherished "final victory" as only a matter of time.

IX. NINE STREAMS

We called it "Nine Streams." If the Embassy gave its approval, the project would enable us to score one on the Communists. Ever since the cease-fire, we had experienced nothing but frustration and disappointment in our dealings with Hanoi's representatives. Time after time, the crafty Communist negotiators had skillfully used procedural obstacles to avoid meaningful business in the MIA talks. A favorite Communist ploy was the demand that the "modalities" for implementing the MIA provisions of the Paris Agreement must precede any actual exchange of information. At other times, Hanoi's representatives insisted that "continuing combat in the liberated zone" precluded any efforts to collect information on the missing and the dead. Even though the reasons varied, the message was always the same. Concrete measures to resolve the fate of the missing and the dead were "not yet possible."

We hoped that the Nine Streams initiative would allow us to expose the Communist tactics for what they were -- trans-