

# In North Vietnam

Noam Chomsky

August 13, 1970

The ICC flight to Hanoi spirals upward around Vientiane until it reaches its assigned altitude, and then passes through a protected corridor over an area that has received some of the most intensive bombing in history. A Phantom jet streaked close by—much to the annoyance of the crew and regular passengers—but apart from that we saw nothing in the heavy clouds until the lights of Hanoi appeared below. The passengers on the flight were a curious mixture: Chinese diplomats; Russian journalists, an Italian novelist, several Poles, and three American visitors.

We arrived on April 10, and departed on the same flight, a week later. Since my visit to Vietnam was so brief, my impressions are necessarily superficial. Since I do not speak Vietnamese, an interpreter was usually necessary, and although the interpreters were highly skilled, the process of translation is time-consuming and certainly retards communication. I will describe what I saw and what I was told. The reader should bear in mind the limitations of what I am able to report.

For a country at war, North Vietnam seems remarkably relaxed and serene. We took long walks, unaccompanied, in Hanoi and in the countryside. Occasionally, we were asked not to take pictures—for example, at the entrance to a cave in which a factory shop was hidden. Our Vietnamese hosts did not ask to develop or check any of the pictures that we took, including color photos. There was also very little security, as far as I could see. We visited Premier Pham Van Dong in a retreat outside the city, but noticed no guards or police anywhere nearby. In the city there were many soldiers sitting by the lakes, walking through the streets, or among the dense waves of cyclists. Their appearance was that of soldiers on leave. There were also many young men in both city and country in civilian occupations. I noticed only a few police, mostly directing traffic and apparently unarmed.

In the countryside a crowd of children collected around us as we walked through a remote village some distance from the administration buildings of Thanh Hoa province, where we spent the night. They assumed that we were Russians, as did the children who waved and shouted “Soviet Union” as we drove through towns and villages. We were invariably greeted with friendly smiles, and in the more remote areas, with some show of curiosity.

Everywhere we went, people seemed healthy, well-fed, and adequately clothed. There was no obvious difference between the living standards of the city and the country. Commodities were scarce. Except for a bicycle, a thermos bottle, perhaps a radio, most people probably have very few consumer goods. I don't think I saw more than a few dozen cars in Hanoi. The center of the city looks not very different from the outskirts. The city is clean and quiet, except for the

honking of the horns of trucks, warning bicycles to clear the way. I had heard that there were loudspeakers everywhere blaring news and announcements, but I recall only one, playing music in a downtown park. The appearance of the city is drab. The scarce resources of the country are largely diverted to the countryside. Some day, if the war ends, Hanoi will be a beautiful city, for it has tree-lined streets and many lakes and parks.

The most striking difference between Hanoi and the countryside is, of course, the devastation and ruin caused by the “air war of destruction.” Hanoi itself, as far as I could see, has not been badly hit, except near the Red River, where the bridge and surrounding areas must have been heavily bombed. But as soon as we left the city limits, we saw enormous destruction. We traveled along the main highway to Thanh Hoa, about ninety miles to the south. The effects of the bombing were visible everywhere. From the road, we could see the entrances to caves where the population, particularly children, had been dispersed during the bombing. Temporary wooden dwellings clustered at the base of the conical hills. The craters became more dense when a bridge lay ahead—sometimes the “bridge” proved to be barely a few yards long. Where there was a bridge, there was often a village. The road and the nearby rail line were also heavily bombed, and the railroad stations remained a mass of debris. Of course, the stations are invariably situated in town or village centers.

US Government propaganda tries to give the impression that aerial bombardment achieves near-surgical accuracy, so that military targets can be destroyed with minimal effect on civilians. Technical documents give a different picture. For example, Captain C. O. Holmquist writes:

One naturally wonders why so many bombing sorties are required in order to destroy a bridge or other pinpoint target.... However, with even the most sophisticated computer system, bombing by any mode remains an inherently inaccurate process, as is evident from our results to date in Vietnam. Aiming errors, boresight errors, system computational errors and bomb dispersion errors all act to degrade the accuracy of the system. Unknown winds at altitudes below the release point and the “combat degradation” factor add more errors to the process. In short, it is impossible to hit a small target with bombs except by sheer luck. Bombing has proved most efficient for area targets such as supply dumps, build-up areas, and cities. [*Naval Review*, 1969, p. 214.]

The American claim that the bombing of North Vietnam was directed against military targets does not withstand direct investigation. But even if one were to accept it, considerations such as those mentioned by Captain Holmquist indicate that this is to a large extent a distinction without a difference.

Some of the names along the road were familiar to me from reading, for example Phu Ly, about ten miles south of Hanoi, which was visited by French and Japanese newsmen shortly after a particularly savage bombing raid. I asked my traveling companion—Professor Mai, formerly a professor of French, Vietnamese, and Chinese literature and now chairman of the Association of Arts and Letters—to point out the town center when we reached it. The former market place was a flattened field of rubble in a bend of the river. A few of the buildings of brick and stone were still standing, but the rest of the town was wiped out. Much of the population had by then returned, and wooden houses were scattered among the ruins. The same was true of the village of Phu Xuyen not far away.

Thanh Hoa itself is a rich agricultural province. Rice fields, a pattern of many shades of green, stretch far into the distance along the road, which also winds through foothills and the fringes of heavy jungle where tigers are said to roam. The vegetation, wild or cultivated, is lush. Watching the peasants working in the fields, the young boys leading their water buffaloes, we almost forgot the war until a sharp reminder came—a cratered field, the rubble of a village, the twisted wreck of a railroad car. We stopped to eat lunch on a wooded hillside where a few peasant women were collecting pine needles. Our hosts warned us to look carefully if we walked too far, since there are still many unexploded bombs.

The capital of Thanh Hoa province—a city of 70,000, I was told—was heavily bombed. The details were related by Professor Mai, who was province chairman in 1947–8 and had been a clandestine member of the Communist Party since its formation in 1930. We passed the wreckage of the provincial offices, now totally destroyed. One wall of a large hospital remains standing. A factory in Thanh Hoa city was also demolished; its separate shops are now dispersed in the surrounding countryside, hidden in caves. A nearby power station was severely damaged, but, I was told, never ceased to function. In the city itself there has been little reconstruction of the original buildings, but here, too, most of the population has apparently returned, and there are wooden structures everywhere alongside the ruins and buildings that remain.

Thanh Hoa is near the sea and we drove to an attractive beach. Not far offshore, we were told, ships of the Seventh Fleet have been stationed and there has been much naval shelling as well as aerial bombardment. Saboteurs and spies were landed in the area, but quickly caught, so we were told. Wooden fishing boats lined the beach. There had been a resort area in the surrounding hills, but it was demolished by the bombardment.

Near Thanh Hoa city, the Ham Rong bridge spans the Ma River. The largest of the bridges we crossed, it is now a rickety structure of twisted steel and shattered concrete. Traffic inches across in a single lane. We were told the story of the bridge one evening in the dim, flickering light of the provincial offices, now hidden near a village some distance from Thanh Hoa city and indistinguishable from other clusters of dwellings. Later, we were shown a film recording the same events. The narrator was Miss Ham, twenty-five years of age, the chief of the militia of Thanh Hoa township. Five years ago she was the militia chief of the village at the site of the Ham Rong bridge.

The bridge was attacked daily from early 1965 until the suspension of the bombing—in this region, in April, 1968. The bridge and the surrounding area were bombed with high explosives and aerial torpedoes, and shelled from ships offshore. Ninety-nine jet planes were downed in these attacks. A steep hill alongside the bridge was reduced to one-third its former size by the bombardment. The village nearby was destroyed, with many casualties.

We returned to the bridge the next day, this time accompanied by the head of the local branch of the Vietnam Fatherland Front, which is essentially the successor organization to the Viet Minh. To me he looked thirty at most, but he must be considerably older, since his seventeen-year-old son is a university student in Hanoi. He related the outlines of the story again as we stood at the bridge in the chilling wind of the monsoon. The hill alongside the bridge, a flag planted on its summit, was, indeed, far smaller than in the films we had been shown the evening before. Its rocky slope was torn and shredded. From where we stood to the hilly ridge in the distance, the fields were barren. There was no trace of the former village. The area was bombed so heavily that even the craters were not delineated, as they generally are along the road. Only the shell of the

building that houses the power station remained in the battered plain. Carved in the hills beyond, just visible from where we stood, were the words: “*Quyét Thang*”—“determined to win.”

The bridge still stands, severely damaged but proud and defiant, a symbol of deep significance to the people of Thanh Hoa. This scene summarizes, more than anything else, the mood of the people I met, from the Premier to students in the university, factory workers, and peasants in the villages. So far as I can tell, the country is unified, strong though poor, and determined to withstand the attack launched against Vietnam by the great superpower of the Western world.

The Vietnamese see their history as an unending series of struggles of resistance to aggression, by the Chinese, the Mongols, the Japanese, the French, and now the Americans. Over and over this history was recounted to us. A dozen times we were told how the Chinese had been beaten back, how the Mongols, who conquered most of Asia and Europe, were unable to cross the Annam mountains into Vietnam because of the fierce resistance of the Vietnamese peasants, unified, even in feudal times, in opposition to the aggressor. The director of the Historical Museum led us through exhibits beginning with the Stone Age, while the members of our entourage listened, with obvious fascination, to his account of Vietnam’s ancient culture and the details of each battle, each campaign. In the Military Museum, the same was true. It was impossible to guess that those who were with us had been through this countless times before, for they listened with rapt attention to each familiar detail.

The Vietnamese see their history as a series of victories, each after a long struggle. A less optimistic view of the same events is that there have been periods of independence in a history of occupation by outside powers. It is striking that they do not interpret their past in this way. I am sure that had I suggested any such interpretation, it would have struck them as bizarre and perverse. There is also no mistaking the confidence with which they approach the future.

We spent an afternoon discussing the present situation with the head of the “Special Representation” of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam.<sup>1</sup> There we met several war victims, hideously maimed, from the South, who were in Hanoi for extended medical treatment. The PRG representatives in Hanoi expect a long and bitter war in the South. They expect the United States to leave an army of 200,000 to 250,000 men, while providing direction and logistic support for a “puppet army” of about 800,000, and continuing or even extending the technological war. They calculate that under Johnson, about two million tons of bombs were dropped in South Vietnam, while the Nixon Administration has already reached the level of 1.2 million tons while intensifying the chemical war.

They see the aim of “pacification” as the concentration of the population in areas that can, it is hoped, be controlled by armed force, areas surrounded by a “no-man’s land” of devastation and destruction. They believe that this policy cannot succeed, that there will be internal decay within the region administered by the increasingly authoritarian and repressive Saigon authorities. They look forward to a coalition government that can organize free general elections and elect a national assembly. In our talks they mentioned such people as Duong Van Minh and Tran Van Don as representatives of a possible “Third Force” with which, if I understood them correctly, they feel they can cooperate. But they see no present sign that the United States would be willing to permit a representative coalition government in South Vietnam.

---

<sup>1</sup> The PRG does not have an embassy, I presume, because they hope to join in a larger coalition government for South Vietnam.

I believe that the DRV leadership also expects a long, continuing war, and sees no indication that the United States intends to abandon its effort to subjugate South Vietnam and dominate the Indochinese peninsula. They do not see any sign of American seriousness in Paris, and interpret each American proposal—quite correctly, I believe—as one or another scheme to maintain the American “puppet” regime in power in South Vietnam. They expect that the bombing of the North may be resumed as the American position erodes elsewhere in Indochina. They anticipate, with confidence, that the American position will deteriorate.

Partly because of the likelihood of resumption of the air war, cities are not being reconstructed and factories remain dispersed. Although North Vietnam has considerable potential for development of hydroelectric power, no dams are being built. Quite apart from the toll taken by the war itself, the threat of further war is a great barrier to development and industrialization.

We spoke one evening to Hoang Tung, the director of Nhan Dan, the major newspaper of North Vietnam, and a member of the Central Committee of the Lao Dong (Workers) Party since 1950. In the 1930s he took part in the youth movement and was jailed from 1940 until 1945, when the Japanese overthrew the French colonial government. He was in charge of the Hanoi section of the victorious insurrection in August, 1945, and then took part in the First Indochina War against the French, fighting in the Red River Delta region. He too outlined for us the course of Vietnamese history, and described the present political and social organization and the plans for development. He spoke softly, with great feeling, about these long struggles, about the suffering of the people, and about the problems that still face them in the future.

The aggressors [he said] have forced the whole of the population to fight or accept death. Our country and other Indochinese countries have experienced all kinds of policies and war methods. Our countries have been a testing ground for the French, the Japanese, and now the Americans. We think that in the whole of history there has not been a people that has had to undergo so many kinds of war.

Take only the United States. They have tried strategic hamlets, the special war of Kennedy, the local war of Johnson, the special-local war of Nixon. We have had to deal with all kinds of theories and doctrines. Our people have not been destroyed. In fact, the US imperialists have put into use all of the forces they can gather. Take the strategic hamlets. This was a great effort. They destroyed tens of thousands of villages and carried away millions of people. Then, they brought in half a million troops. They undertook the air war against the North. We cannot find in history such a concentration of bombardment. In South Vietnam alone, three million tons of bombs, and in addition other kinds of ordnance. It far exceeds World War II. The Vietnamese are a small people. Only 37 million. Now we have reached this stage. We can go to the end.

In 1954, he added, “We were not vigilant enough; we did not expect another war.” But now, he said, it is understood that the US ruling forces do not wish to leave Asia to its own people. Nixon may succeed in gathering the reactionary forces of Asia, but the forces opposing imperialism will also gather together. There will be a long struggle: the reactionary forces against the popular forces in Asia. But the feeling of nationalism runs very high, and the reactionary forces cannot win.

Premier Pham Van Dong spoke in a similar vein. President Nixon, he said, seems to want to expand the war. Cambodia is an example.<sup>2</sup> But “the sorcerer is not always in a position to control what he has created.” Prince Sihanouk has called for armed struggle, and the three peoples of Indochina will now combine their patriotic struggles. “In the end, justice is the decisive factor, and justice will prevail.”

We asked whether he conceived of some kind of federation of the peoples of Indochina in the long run, and mentioned Senator Fulbright’s recent statement that North Vietnam, as the strongest and most dynamic society, would be likely to dominate the region. The Premier agreed that North Vietnam is stronger than its neighbors in Indochina, but he vehemently dismissed any possibility of its dominating the region and rejected any thought of federation in the foreseeable future. Even for the reunification of Vietnam, he said, it is impossible now to provide a specific plan, a “blueprint.”

The Indochinese peninsula must be free and independent. South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos will be neutral. Given the present situation, this is a likely prospect. Only Nixon is opposed to this.

It is interesting that Pham Van Dong reiterated the formula proposed by the NLF in 1962 and ignored, in fact suppressed, in the United States: namely, that South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia be neutral. Then, as now, this was a very reasonable proposal, and a likely outcome if the United States were to withdraw from the region. Then, as now, there were no prospects for achieving the neutralization of South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia because of the American insistence on retaining these countries within the American orbit, along with the periphery of the Asian land mass.

The Premier also expressed confidence in the future. “B-52s and computers can’t compete with a just cause and human intelligence,” he said. The Vietnamese people and the other peoples of Indochina must still undergo great suffering, but ultimately they will win.

It is, of course, not surprising that the leaders of the country should appear confident before foreign visitors. However, I sensed no deviation from this mood in discussions with other Vietnamese. The people I met exhibited no bravado, only a quiet confidence in the justice of their cause and the eventual achievement of independence and the defeat of foreign aggression.

The personal stories they told were sometimes unbearably painful. We had a few hours to spare on our last afternoon in Hanoi, and were taken on a tour of the city. In “Reunification Park,” near a lake surrounded with newly planted trees that are characteristic of the southern part of Vietnam, my interpreter told me something about his life.

He is a native of the South, from Quang Ngai province. He had joined the Viet Minh as a young man, and then came North with his father in 1954, leaving his mother and sisters behind. He expected to return in 1956 after the promised elections that were to reunify the country. Since that time, he has not heard a word from any member of his family in the South. The United States not only prevented the elections, but moved at once to block all communication, even mail, between North and South Vietnam.

---

<sup>2</sup> The reference is to the March 18 coup and the subsequent attacks in Cambodia by the Saigon army. The date of this interview was April 16, two weeks before the American invasion of Cambodia. Some form of direct American intervention in Cambodia was clearly anticipated, though it may be that the scale of the American invasion came as something of a surprise.

He can only guess what his family and friends have suffered since. With some reluctance, I told him what I knew of the recent history of Quang Ngai province, which was more savagely attacked than any other part of Vietnam. Now that I have returned home, shall I send him Jonathan Schell's book on the American destruction of Quang Ngai province? Or the reports by Dr. Alje Vennema, director of a Canadian TB hospital in Quang Ngai province until August, 1968, when he left feeling that he could do nothing useful there any more, that "my service was futile"?

Dr. Vennema reports that he did nothing about the My Lai slayings, which he knew of at once, "because it was nothing new":

They were being talked about among the Vietnamese people, but no more than other incidents [for example a massacre at Son-Tra in February of 1968 and another similar incident during the summer in the Mo-Duc district].... I had heard this type of story many times before, however, and had spoken to US and Canadian officials about the senseless killings of civilians that were going on...[the] senseless bombings.

According to an interview with Dr. Vennema in the Ottawa *Citizen*, the province

...had become a "no man's land" with half the population in refugee camps, children starving and much land and foliage destroyed. His patients were constantly telling him of the shootings of their family and friends, and every time he treated a child for war wounds, "five more were brought in."...Clair Culhane, who worked in 1968 as an administrator in the Canadian TB hospital in Quang Ngai, said a report filed from the hospital in April '68 mentioned the difficulties of working in an area with Americans "who boasted about the brutalities and massacres they were engaged in."<sup>3</sup>

Shall I send my interpreter, Mr. Tri, the books now appearing about the My Lai massacre, or about the incomparably greater atrocity of the war itself in Quang Ngai, or any other part of the country that resists American rule?

Mr. Tri knew about most of this, and spoke of it with uncanny calm. It is remarkable that one senses no hatred, no hostility toward Americans, but rather a great curiosity about American life, sympathy for the "difficult situation" of those in the peace movement who are forced to "struggle against their Government," even sympathy for the soldiers and pilots who are misled into participating in the "*sale guerre*" of the Americans in Vietnam.

In Thanh Hoa province, near the province capital, we visited a factory buried inside a mountain. Between thirty and thirty-five men and women work there with machine tools, making parts for buses and trucks. Generally there are two people at a machine, one a skilled worker, one an apprentice. Over tea and beer, in one corner of the dank and dimly lit cave, the manager told us how, during the "air war of destruction," the entire factory had been dispersed to such sites as this one. The mountain itself had been heavily bombed, but there was no damage to the facilities inside the cave, which was hewed out by hand while the bombing proceeded.

Afterward, the workers in the cave grouped themselves at the end of the table where we were sitting and, as a welcome greeting, sang songs, patriotic and sentimental, and declaimed poems. The whole experience was intensely moving. As I left, I swore to myself not to speak or write about it, knowing how a sophisticated Westerner might react. Let the reader think what he may.

---

<sup>3</sup> January 12, 1970.

The fact is that it was intensely moving to see the spirit of the people in this miserable place, working, in the face of all of the obstacles that American power can erect, to defend their country and to find their way into the modern age.

We left the factory on an unpaved road through the heavily cratered fields, and went on to a remote agricultural cooperative far from the main highway. Over more tea and beer, the mayor, a young woman who looked to be in her mid-twenties, provided us with details about production and village organization, and answered some questions about their plans and hopes. Two-thirds of the workers in the village are involved in handicrafts, mostly weaving. They hope to receive machinery from the state for this industry, now partially collectivized. The fields are intensively cultivated, as we could see when we drove past, and like most other villages in the country, they have now achieved two harvests a year in their rice fields, more than doubling former production levels while at the same time diversifying their crops considerably. The road to the village and the fields within its range are lined with young pine trees, planted during a recent reforestation campaign, the signs of which are visible everywhere.

We spent several hours in the co-operative, visiting a small dispensary and two schools. The dispensary, clean and fairly well-equipped, had sections for Western and Oriental medicine. Outside the Oriental pharmacy there were baskets of many different types of herbs, most of them from the garden of the dispensary. All children are now born in the maternity section of the dispensary.

The wards were empty when we were there. A few patients were in the clinic, and in the maternity section several women were chatting with a young mother whose newborn baby was in a crib in the next room. We were told that the traditional diseases (malaria, trachoma) are virtually non-existent. They intend to maintain traditional and Western medicine side-by-side, but I noticed that in the Oriental section the practitioners and the pharmacist were considerably older. There is a larger district hospital for more serious cases. I did not ask whether the large provincial hospital, destroyed during the air war, had been rebuilt somewhere else.

We sat in a mathematics class (seventh grade, children of twelve to fourteen) for some time. There were forty-five children studying geometry. I looked through some of the children's notebooks, which contained neatly done, quite advanced algebra problems. The lesson was lively. Children tried to work out proofs of theorems as the teacher sketched their proposals on the blackboard. The level was remarkably high, easily as advanced as anything I know of in the United States. It was particularly striking to find such work in a remote village, barely a generation removed from illiteracy.

We were told that literacy among adults has been virtually universal for some years, and that in this agricultural province of two million people everyone receives ten grades of schooling<sup>4</sup> and about 800 students go to the university each year, while about 200 go abroad, most (perhaps all—I am not sure) of them to Eastern Europe. In principle, they are largely expected to return to the village. The war, however, has disrupted the intended normal pattern.

We were later told that this was an average village economically, neither among the poorest nor among the richest in the area, and I gather that our visit was intended as something of a gesture of encouragement for the villagers. The peasants have private gardens, and there is a free market

---

<sup>4</sup> I did not think to ask whether this is also true of the many mountain tribesmen in the province, who are said to retain much of their original culture. Our guide for part of the trip was the assistant province chairman, a member of the Muong minority of hill tribesmen, the minority that is said to be closest in cultural pattern to the Viet lowlanders.

alongside the state market—literally alongside, as we saw later in Hanoi, where both markets are housed under one roof. On street corners in Hanoi one still sees peasant women selling their produce. However, there seems to be little incentive for the peasants to use the free market, since agricultural prices set by the state are, I understand, set artificially high in accordance with the policy of equalizing standards in country and city.

There are still some peasants who have not joined the cooperatives, but apparently not many, the advantages of joining being rather obvious, including not only state assistance but also the benefits achieved through mutual aid. Along the road to the village we saw groups working on irrigation projects, constructing large earthen dikes and channels, and the completed irrigation works from earlier projects could be seen everywhere. The larger irrigation projects are constructed by the state; local projects are developed under regional organization and by the villages themselves.

In principle, the cooperative is expected to put aside 1 to 5 percent of its income from agricultural production and a varying percentage of its income from other production for development, presumably under independent village-based initiative. A general meeting of the cooperative makes decisions about such matters and sets the rate of accumulation and the program for development, deciding, for example, whether to build a school, to work for extra profits, and so on. An annual meeting of all adult members selects an administrative committee for the cooperative.

We were also told that in traditional Vietnamese peasant society there was a certain degree of mutual aid and some communal land, and also considerable village and regional independence. Land holdings were limited in size by the “law of the king.” Under the French, this changed. Free ownership of land was permitted, and large plantations were developed as well, particularly in the South. Catholics were particularly privileged, and many priests and archbishops became great landowners. Large feudal holdings grew “where the stork can fly and never get tired.” There was very little development, either industrial or agricultural. Now great efforts are being made, apparently with success, to expand agricultural production and to develop regional industry that is related to local needs.

The New Zealand geographer Keith Buchanan has discussed the early achievements of the Vietnamese revolution in a general review of problems of development in Asian peasant society.<sup>5</sup> He concludes that

...the achievements of the North Vietnamese in the economic field have been considerable and they demonstrate to the rest of Southeast Asia the conditions under which real economic progress is possible. The achievements in the socio-cultural field, more specifically in the field of minority policy, have been equally striking and these, in the long run, may prove of even greater relevance to the neighbouring countries of Southeast Asia.

Of course, he was writing before the bombing destroyed most of the early achievements of industrialization.<sup>6</sup>

The process of regional diversification was spurred by the air war, and is now apparently to be maintained and extended. It is surely a very healthy development. “The price may be higher and

---

<sup>5</sup> See Keith Buchanan, *The Southeast Asian World*, London, 1967.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed investigation of rural Vietnam, see Gérard Chaliand, *The Peasants of North Vietnam*, 1968; English translation, Penguin, 1969. See also the report by Richard Gott of a seven-week trip, *Manchester Guardian*, February 24–27, 1970.

quality not always good, but goods are produced for local needs and self-supply in each province,” we were told by Hoang Tung when we discussed these questions back in Hanoi. Special attention is given to training skilled workers. Heavy industry will have to wait, as present plans are to develop agriculture and small industry related to agriculture and local needs.

The country has rich supplies of metals, coal, and other material requirements for industrialization, and can develop ample hydroelectric power when the threat of bombing is removed. In view of the remarkably high standards of education and health extending to the remote areas as well as the urban centers, there seems every possibility that industrial development can be realized, and that North Vietnam can be spared a Manila, a Bangkok, or a Saigon—an artificial consumer culture for a minority of the privileged in the midst of urban slums and rural stagnation.

Although there appears to be a high degree of democratic participation at the village and regional levels, and some degree of leeway for independent planning at these levels—limited, to be sure, by the exigencies of war—still major planning is highly centralized in the hands of the state authorities. As Hoang Tung explained, the Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party sets the general lines of policy. These plans are implemented by governmental bodies selected by the National Assembly, which also drafts specific plans. The ministries are responsible to the Assembly, which is chosen by direct election from local districts that extend over the entire country, including the mountain tribesmen, who are well represented. The managers of local enterprises are selected by the government ministries that are in charge of various branches of the economy.

Each factory has a congress once a year of all workers, to which the manager reports. A party cell in the factory, containing 10 to 20 percent of the work force, gives advice to the manager. There is also a trade union organization which seems to concern itself largely with education and welfare programs. There are also, in each workshop, production teams of skilled and unskilled workers, and apparently there are plans, the details of which I had no time to investigate, to rearrange the internal organization of various enterprises.

This account is based on information provided in conversations with officials at various levels of administration and other knowledgeable people whom I met. Clearly, I am in no position to flesh out the account with detailed impressions or the results of personal investigation.

The central planning role of the Lao Dong Party is stressed in the major government documents. Le Duan, in his recent “analysis of the great problems, essential tasks, and principles and methods of action of the Vietnamese revolution,”<sup>7</sup> lays great stress on this governing role:

An important task of economic organization is to determine correctly the *relationships between the Party, the State and the popular masses* in the matter of economic management. As director and general staff of the army of builders of the economy, the Party has the mission of defining the line and fundamental measures, fixing the leading principles, the programs and methods, mobilizing the masses for a powerful offensive on the economic front, supervising the activity of the governmental services. Party direction is a historical necessity which guarantees for our economy an economic development conforming to a fixed orientation, safeguards the rights and interests of various strata of the population, and reinforces incessantly the governing role of the people.

---

<sup>7</sup> *La Révolution Vietnamiennne: problèmes fondamentaux, tâches essentielles*, Hanoi, 1970, Introduction.

In the revolution in general and economic development in particular, our Party has no interest particular to itself. The totality of the national economy, just as each factory and each rice field, is the property of the people, under different forms and in various economic and technical conditions. This objective reality requires the Party to arrange for different modes of direction that fit each case (industry, agriculture, factories, cooperatives) and that permit the Party to maintain its directing role, making sure that the managerial prerogatives of administration are respected and at the same time assuring to the popular masses the direct exercise of their right to rule.

Le Duan's policy statement reveals clearly the extent to which the Vietnamese revolution, in its current state at least, is a revolution of modernization and development:

"To tighten the belt," to reduce all inessential expenditures and to resolutely commit capital for accumulation, is a dominant necessity, and testifies to a high level of political understanding with respect to the construction of socialism.

This revolution of development, it is made clear, must be the work of the masses of the population and must involve direct participation and self-education. In the present state of Vietnamese society, management of the economy.

...must be very flexible, in conformity with the economic laws of socialism and of the process of development proceeding from small-scale to heavy production; it must combine unified central direction with the right of governance of the various branches, regions and units of the base; it must extend the system of planing while making use of market relations where appropriate [...for regulating economic indices and economic activities of secondary importance not provided for by the general plan...] and extending the domain of general accounting; it must promote both the material interest and the political and ideological education, the socialist education, of the great masses of the population.

That all of these tasks are compatible is not obvious, and it remains to be seen how they can be realized. Present plans appear to be a composite of Communist Party ideology, traditional Vietnamese social and cultural patterns, the exigencies of a wartime economy and of the general problems of modernization and development. My personal guess is that, unhindered by imperialist intervention, the Vietnamese would develop a modern industrial society with much popular participation in its implementation and much direct democracy at the lower levels of organization. It would be a highly egalitarian society with excellent conditions of welfare and technical education, but with a degree of centralization of control which, in the long run, will pose serious problems that can be overcome only if they eliminate party direction in favor of direct popular control at all levels.

At the moment, the leadership appears to be approaching these problems in a flexible and intelligent fashion. But the problems of creating a modern, egalitarian, democratic industrial society are not slight. They have not been solved successfully anywhere in the world as yet, and it will be extremely interesting to see how they will be faced in the future, if the Vietnamese are given the opportunity to deal with their internal problems under the conditions of independence and peace that they are at present struggling to achieve.

Richard Gott, a journalist with much experience in underdeveloped countries, summed up his impressions after his recent trip for *The Manchester Guardian* as follows:

To anyone familiar with the underdeveloped rural areas of the world, especially in Latin America, North Vietnam is by no means an abjectly poor country. The population is poor, of course, but there is no “misery”—that appalling hopeless poverty one encounters too often in the Third World.

Of course there are inequalities. Hanoi is better off than the countryside. The delta areas are richer than the “panhandle.” The mountainous regions have less pressure of population and more access to wood. But by getting rid of the rich, and avoiding extremes of poverty, Vietnam gives the impression of a prospering, cohesive society, unique in the under-developed world.

He quotes an old man in a southern province:

When a landlord passed in the road, the peasants used to fold their arms and bow. Not until we had the land reform could we get rid of the influence of the landlords. This was our greatest difficulty. Vietnamese peasants lived under feudal lords for thousands of years. They were psychologically subservient to landlords. Whenever they wanted to do anything, they felt they ought to ask the landlord first. Basically, peasants have a very conservative attitude and are very mean. They have to be educated. This was the biggest problem.

As Gott notes, the land reform of 1954 took a fearful toll; it was “a chaotic affair, with thousands of people using the opportunity to pay off old scores,” and thousands were killed in an eruption of violence and terror.<sup>8</sup> It also, in his view, laid the basis for a new society which has overcome starvation and rural misery and offers the peasant hope for the future:

The most important change of all is in the peasants themselves. It would be hard to find now a more purposeful or determined people. There is none of that awful

---

<sup>8</sup> According to the very well-informed French journalist Georges Chaffard, the land reform “was carried out in an excessively brutal manner by inexperienced cadres mostly originating from the armed forces, who had only received a few weeks’ training [in land reform problems] prior to being sent into the villages, their heads full of badly assimilated theories.” Quoted by Bernard Fall, *Viet-Nam Witness*, Praeger, 1966, p.97, from *Le Monde* Weekly Selection, December 5, 1956:

Much American discussion of the land reform is based on Hoang Van Chi. *From Colonialism to Communism*, Praeger, 1964. This book, subsidized (without acknowledgment) by USIA, is an extremely dubious source. For a careful analysis of errors and bias, see Steven Seltzer, “The Land Reform in North Vietnam,” *Viet Report*, June-July, 1967.

In the Introduction, P.J. Honey writes that the author, in his various writings, “has explained the reasons for the failure of communist agriculture, not only in Vietnam, but in China and North Korea too.” In fact, North Vietnam has succeeded, contrary to general expectation, in resolving successfully an extremely difficult problem of agricultural production. For some discussion by a serious observer, see Keith Buchanan, *The Southeast Asian World*. On the “failure” in China, see John Gurley, *Bulletin of the Concerned Asian Scholars*, April-July, 1970. For some recent comment on the North Korean “failure,” as seen by a hostile though knowledgeable observer, see Joungwon Kim, *Foreign Affairs*, October, 1969. It is remarkable that Honey is taken seriously as a commentator on North Vietnam. Where his statements can be checked, they often prove merely ludicrous. For a few examples, see my *American Power and the New Mandarins*, p. 290.

cringing deference that you encounter among Latin-American peasants—who remain beaten into apathy by centuries of landlord oppression. The departure of the landlords has lifted a yoke from the peasantry and liberated an almost unprecedentedly powerful force.

The British China scholar Jack Gray recently summarized Mao's socio-economic theory of development as stressing the need for

...inducing the villagers gradually, through their own efforts toward an intermediate technology, to mechanize out of their own resources and to operate the machines with their own hands, in a milieu in which local industry, agricultural mechanization, agricultural diversification, and the education (both formal and informal) growing out of these activities mutually enrich each other.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, “the collectives will be run by peasant cadres for the peasants.” From what I have seen and read, I would say that North Vietnam is successfully applying these concepts of development.

To understand just how remarkable is the achievement of development in North Vietnam, it is useful to return to some of the forecasts made by the most knowledgeable experts at the end of the First Indochina War. Bernard Fall, writing in 1954, regarded the situation in the North as almost hopeless:

The southern part of the country is its “iron lung,” with its huge rice surplus and dollar-earning exports of rubber, pepper, coffee, and precious woods. It is obvious that, deprived of the south, the Ho Chi Minh regime would face either starvation—as in 1946 when it was deprived of southern imports—or a type of integration into the Red Chinese economy that would be the equivalent of annexation.<sup>10</sup>

The DRV was cut off from the South by American duplicity and force. It has been severely bombed and drawn into a ruinous war. But there is no starvation—far from it. And it has not been integrated into the Chinese economy. Its achievements are, indeed, quite remarkable.

One purpose of the American bombing of the North, in Gérard Chaliand's characterization, was “to demoralize ordinary citizens until, directly or indirectly, they pressurized the Hanoi government into suing for peace.” Thus the bombing aimed at

...undoing the hard, patient work of many years. In a world whose basic problem is surely the backwardness and penury of two thirds of the planet, the United States government—whatever excuses it may invoke—has systematically destroyed the economic infrastructure of one of the three or four “underdeveloped” countries which have seriously laid the foundations for their own industrialization.... In the view of most countries—especially the newer ones—the American intervention in Vietnam is an attempt to stifle national independence and dignity. [See note 6.]

---

<sup>9</sup> “Economics of Maoism,” *China after the Cultural Revolution*, selections from the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, Random House, 1969, Gray also notes that Western theorists of development are belatedly coming to some of the same conclusions.

<sup>10</sup> *The Nation*, March 6, 1954. Reprinted in *Viet-Nam Witness*, pp. 15–21.

This assessment is, I believe, entirely correct. The attempt has failed, dismally. There is no doubt that the spirit of national independence and dignity is high, and that the Vietnamese are proceeding to lay the basis for a modern society.

I have some sense of their achievement in this respect from discussions with Vietnamese scientists and intellectuals. After a long and very productive meeting, I was asked to lecture about current work in linguistics at the Polytechnic University, and was able to do so for about seven hours, to a group of about seventy or eighty linguists and mathematicians.

Their work, in this rather remote field of science and scholarship, meets international standards. I lectured approximately as I would at Tokyo, Oxford, or the Sorbonne. They are not familiar with the most recent work because of the unavailability of materials, but they can, I believe, catch up with the others if this problem is overcome—and to help them to overcome it, in all fields, is one small effort that Americans might make in the hopeless task of compensating for the destruction of much of what the Vietnamese have created with such remarkable enterprise, diligence, and courage.

One of the members of the group at the Polytechnic University had studied in East Berlin in one of the main centers of linguistics in the world. Beyond what he could supply, the group made good use of the meager resources available. Other scientists and intellectuals too were extremely eager to discuss current work and educational curricula, and to hear about colleagues whom they knew by reputation or had, occasionally, met at international conferences. So far as I could judge, the work in some branches of mathematics was also excellent, though here too there was a general problem of access to recent work. The problem is not limited to technical and scientific areas. Thus a professor of American literature approached me to speak about current writing—he had not seen an American novel for fifteen years and wanted to know, in particular, what Norman Mailer had been doing lately.

The students generally read English, but, having little familiarity with the spoken language, were not able to follow a technical lecture. The translators, though excellent in general discussion, had considerable difficulty as the material became more technical and complex. One tried for about an hour, and then, apologetically, asked to be relieved. A second translator also made a noble effort, but the problems were severe. When they floundered, an older man in the audience intervened, and corrected mistakes or explained obscure points. It was obvious that he followed everything very well and understood the material I was trying to present. Finally he took over completely, and translated for several hours without a break.

I was introduced to him later. He was the Minister of Higher Education of North Vietnam, Ta Quang Buu, a mathematician of note who had, in fact, sent me a reprint on mathematical linguistics several years ago, which I could not read, since it was in Vietnamese, but which astonished me by its familiarity—in the midst of the air war—with current technical material. I did not think to ask, but I assume that this is the Ta Quang Buu who was a general during the First Indochina War. We had only a brief chance to talk afterward, to my great disappointment. I think there are few countries where the Minister of Higher Education could have taken over the task of translating an advanced technical lecture of this sort, or would have been willing to do so. I was also impressed by the easy familiarity of relations within the group and the quality of the debate and discussion as we proceeded.

After my last lecture I was given several presents, one a Vietnamese dictionary that the linguists had compiled and printed while they were dispersed in the forests and mountains during the air war. With justifiable pride, they observed that this work had been done while the Ameri-

can government was attempting to “drive them back to the Stone Age.” In fact, at the Polytechnic University the Vietnamese are training scientists of whom any society could be proud.

I was surprised to find myself lecturing on technical material in Hanoi and spending hours with colleagues discussing work in progress in the United States. This surprise is a result of my own failure to overcome regrettable stereotypes. The Vietnamese are devoting themselves not only to securing their independence in a bitter war but also to creating a modern society with a high level of general culture. Given half a chance, they will, I am convinced, succeed in this. To meet with Vietnamese colleagues, to explore our common interests, and to learn of their work and plans was a great personal pleasure to me.

In his will, President Ho Chi Minh wrote that though the war may last long and though new sacrifices will be necessary, still “our rivers, our mountains, our men will always remain.” With nuclear weapons, the United States could destroy these hopes, but short of that, I doubt that it can overcome the resistance of the Vietnamese or impose client governments on the people of Indochina.

I left Southeast Asia, after this brief stay, with two overriding general impressions. The first was of the resilience and strength of Vietnamese society. It is conceivable that the United States may be able to break the will of the popular movements in the surrounding countries, perhaps even destroy the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, by employing the vast resources of violence and terror at its command. If so, it will create a situation in which, indeed, North Vietnam will necessarily dominate Indochina, for no other functioning society will remain.

The American intervention, like all other imperialist wars, has stirred up ethnic and class hatreds, set groups against one another, intensified every conceivable antagonism to bloody conflict. The Vietnamese and the Thai, the two strongest and most dynamic societies in the region, are virtually at war. The Cambodian army has massacred Vietnamese. The Meo have been set against the Lao and other hill tribesmen. The Thai are driving the mountain tribesmen from their homes and fear the native Lao population. The Thai and Saigon elites are now laying plans to devour Cambodia. Chinese Nationalist troops remain active in border areas. Khmer mercenaries fight the Viet Cong alongside Thai and South Koreans brought by the Americans. Native elites, dependent on the flow of American goods and war expenditures, have been drawn into a brutal war against the peasantry.

Not all of this is a direct consequence of the American war in Indochina, but there is no doubt that every potential conflict, every form of latent hostility, has been exacerbated as a result of the American intervention, often by design and direct manipulation. Even if the United States were to leave Indochina to its own people—and there is, for the moment, not a sign of any such intention—this legacy of hatred would remain, embittering the lives of the people of Indochina and denying them the hope of creating a decent future.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Noam Chomsky  
In North Vietnam  
August 13, 1970

Retrieved on 30<sup>th</sup> October 2020 from [chomsky.info](http://chomsky.info)  
*The New York Review of Books*, August 13, 1970

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**