

## INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Choosing Life: Part Two

Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
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Dear Mr. Nolte:

Our public institutions are in a crisis state, yet there is hardly any appreciation of this reality. Rather, as I travelled about the US on my recent trip, I noticed only "business as usual." Certainly many felt that something is wrong in the world today, but the universal tendency was to externalize it: changes in the world weather patterns, fanatical politicians in the Middle East, "autonomous" imperatives of technology impelling us further into a pointless arms race. And, in relation to Vietnam, I detected among the government officials I spoke with hardly any sense that we have been through something so catastrophic that any other nation undergoing such a strain would have suffered bankruptcy, or revolution, or both. No one collared me in the halls of the Pentagon or the State Department and forced me to listen to a monologue on how this catastrophe should lead us to examine our public institutions with the most searching scrutiny. Some people tended to blame individuals, but it is not the failings of individual leaders per se that concern us, since the problems we have had have continued despite changes in administrations. Nevertheless individuals cannot escape responsibility, since institutions only work through individuals.

Let us return to the issue of Vietnam for a poignant illustration. At the beginning of this year President Ford requested \$300 million in military aid for Saigon, asserting that these funds "could very likely be a key for the preservation of [South Vietnam's] freedom." He went on to add that Ambassador Graham Martin had assured him that if adequate funds were subsequently forthcoming, "within two or three years the South Vietnamese would be over the hump militarily as well as economically."

That, with the perspective available in January 1975, the first citizen in the land could make statements so preposterous on so many counts indicates a loss of contact with reality suggestive of dementia. Men have certainly been committed for departing into a less distant dream world than these statements suggest. But that the American people and their representatives took so long to wake up to their preposterousness illustrates that it is not dementia (how can one lock up a whole people?) but something far more serious. Whatever the causes, it is a situation of the utmost gravity.

We are dealing with a distortion of judgment, to which several things contribute: values; lying, which warps the flows of information; and a preference for certain kinds of means. I discussed the first two in my last letter. Let me now speak a bit about means.

Here there is a strictly factual question involved. Would \$300 million of

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military aid have been sufficient to retrieve a situation where \$150 billion worth of effort had failed? The question is answered in the posing.

Again, the elegance and succinctness of the novelist surpasses in persuasive power any recitation of facts which the lowly social scientist can bring to bear. Dickens answered our question a century ago, speaking of the failure to understand of those who had been swept away by the French Revolution:

"It was too much the way of Monseigneur under his reverses as a refugee, and it was too much the way of native British orthodoxy, to talk of this terrible Revolution as if it were the only harvest ever known under the skies that had not been sown -- as if nothing had ever been done, or omitted to be done, that had led to it -- as if observers of the wretched millions in France, and of the misused and perverted resources that should have made them prosperous, had not seen it all inevitably coming, years before, and had not in plain words recorded what they saw."

As Dickens wrote of France, so it is true that what has come to pass in Vietnam was predictable, and predicted. For decades observers have seen these events coming, and they indeed recorded in plain words what they saw. The catalogue -- and I provide here just the highpoints -- is a dismal reminder of our folly.

1. Already in the 1930's French economists were warning that the means that had been used to clear and settle the Mekong Delta, creating as they had a large tenant class, threatened an ultimate social explosion.

2. In 1946 Ho Chi Minh, attempting to stave off a French reconquest of Vietnam, warned Jean Sainteny, "If we must fight, we will fight. You will kill ten of our men, but we will kill one of yours. And in the end it is you that will tire." Words of an arrogant nationalist, one might say -- except they proved correct in 1954 -- were disregarded -- and proved correct again in 1975.

3. On December 19, 1946, John Carter Vincent, Director of the State Department's Bureau of Far Eastern Affairs, wrote in a memo to Under Secretary Dean Acheson:

" . . . with inadequate forces, with public opinion sharply at odds, with a government rendered largely ineffective through internal division, the French have tried to accomplish in Indochina what a strong and united Britain has found it unwise to attempt in Burma. Given the present elements of the situation, guerrilla warfare may continue indefinitely."

(We have the publication of the Pentagon Papers to thank for access to this memo.)

4. Paul Mus, eminent French sociologist, likewise warned against the attempt to reimpose white domination on Vietnam by military conquest.

5. A Foreign Service officer named Ogburn, who had served in Vietnam, wrote a memorandum warning of the dangers of the US policy of supporting a repressive government such as Diem's. (This on the occasion of his resignation; my filing system does not permit me to retrieve a copy of his warning right now.)

6. The US Government contracted with Michigan State University for a study team to work in Vietnam, which they did during the mid- and late-50's. Among their many conclusions were that serious troubles lay ahead unless the regressive nature of the taxation system were turned around; the upland tribal peoples were favorably integrated into the political system; serious land reform were undertaken; the existing extreme centralization of power were overcome; and a decentralized,

local constabulary were set up, rather than (as planned) a centralized, mechanized regular army. Not one of these recommendations was followed: the injustices of the tax system were ignored; discrimination against the uplanders continued (leading to a revolt in 1964); the US Mission, as Roy Prosterman has written "obligingly failed to have present in Vietnam even one full time official dealing with the land-reform problem"; the political problems of overcentralization were submerged by the overwhelming desire to stay on good terms with Diem and his successors and to provide them military assistance; and the US went on explicitly to create a large conventional army which has now predictably collapsed in the face of a threat which it was not designed to cope with. (For its troubles the MSU team was thrown out of Vietnam in 1962.)

7. Even General Maxwell Taylor, in his 1961 report to President Kennedy, warned that "there is no limit to our possible commitment." (Again we have the Pentagon Papers to thank for this retrospective information.)

8. George Ball, on July 1, 1965, warned President Johnson:

"The South Vietnamese are losing the war to the Viet Cong. No one can assure you that we can beat the Viet Cong or even force them to the conference table on our terms, no matter how many hundred thousand white, foreign (US) troops we deploy . . . . The decision you face now, therefore, is crucial. Once large numbers of US troops are committed to direct combat . . . [and] once we suffer large casualties, we will have started a well-nigh irreversible process. Our involvement will be so great that we cannot -- without national humiliation -- stop short of achieving our complete objectives. Of the two possibilities I think humiliation would be more likely than the achievement of our objectives -- even after we have paid terrible costs.

(This remarkable statement again secret until the publication of the Pentagon Papers.)

But, the man of power will say, these warnings of danger ahead were not certain, one hundred percent. Disaster was not guaranteed. Why should we let ourselves be deterred by nervous Nellies? A good question (often put, in fact); and it has a good answer (which I haven't seen). The answer simply is, what standard does one apply in handling the public's business? The Department of Defense is not Procter and Gamble, launching a new product -- if it is a failure, we just chalk it up to profit and loss. People's lives were at stake in Vietnam; one does not apply the same standard as in selling toothpaste or automobiles.

Asking a simple question would have revealed the dangerous perspective of Vietnam policy makers. Many people warned them of disaster ahead. They were not persuaded. They should have been asked -- indeed they had an obligation to ask themselves, but we have no information any ever did -- "If this evidence does not persuade you of disaster ahead, WHAT EVIDENCE WOULD?" My hunch, and it can only be a hunch now, since disaster has already struck, is that there would be no answer, because they had never thought about that simple, most basic, and most obligatory of all questions. As a result these imprudent men treated as trifles -- like toothpaste -- our lives, our fortunes, and our now battered honor.

An incident a few years back may serve to illustrate this attitude by example. As I wrote in JEF-20, in 1972 I published a book on Vietnam, the result of having spent three years in that country, a good part of it in Long An province, the subject of my study. As is the custom in the academic world, while I was preparing the book for publication I produced a short article summarizing my

findings, so as to make them available quickly to other people working in the field. It was published in the August 1970 issue of Asian Survey, was titled "How They Won," and it explained why the Saigon government's organs had collapsed in Long An in the early part of the decade and why the US response was irrelevant to the factors involved.

The senior American officer in Long An at the time I was doing the study was Colonel (now Brigadier General, ret.) James Herbert. He presently heads the refugee relocation program. I think I shall go a long time before I meet a more reflective, conscientious, and thoughtful officer. Whenever I was in Long An I stayed in his apartment, and we would be up late into the evening discussing political and military developments. I have hours of tape-recorded interviews which he generously consented to give me out of his overbusy schedule.

During 1971 I had lunch with him in Washington, where he was now serving at the Pentagon, and he related that Robert Komer, formerly head of the pacification program in Vietnam, had run into him in a Pentagon corridor just recently, and said he had just read an article in Asian Survey by one Jeff Race. Had Herbert ever heard of Jeff Race, and had Race ever visited Long An? Jim Herbert and I both had a good laugh about this, but the serious point is that Komer, "with the personal rank of ambassador," as he was always described, and reading all the secret intelligence reports from the field, could not imagine how anyone who had ever visited Long An province could write the analysis which I wrote -- so different was his map of reality and the issues he considered important. But I was not the first to make the points covered in "How They Won." So I conclude that messages such as I was trying to communicate simply couldn't get through to Komer, even if he read them. With his cognitive map, Vietnam was a technical problem, not a human one, and technological means were the way to solve it. Technological solutions to human problems: the same syndrome that afflicted Dr. X and General Y, as I wrote in JEF-20.

If we expect public officials to begin applying different standards to the conduct of the public's business, then I think the public should also begin applying different standards to the behavior of public officials. Some of my colleagues shrug off President Ford's remarks in requesting the \$300 million by saying it was hyperbole, political rhetoric, which even Ford didn't believe as he uttered it. But again, lives -- not profits -- depend on the words of the President of the United States. We should and must come to apply at least as high a standard to public officials as we do to General Motors when we buy a car or to Pfizer when we buy a drug. But Americans seem to have lost the ability to call a public official a scoundrel. If someone sells death but calls it life, and knew or had adequate reason to know it was death, then he is a scoundrel and a swindler and should be identified as such. That we can no longer bring ourselves to use such words, even when they are deserved, is just one more depressing example of how the vocabulary of American political discourse has come to lose its meaning.

The only time I can remember seeing the word "scoundrel" used in this context was in a remarkable interview with J. Fred Buzhardt, formerly counsel to President Nixon. "Would you rather have a competent scoundrel or an honest boob in office," asks Buzhardt in the interview, implying that moral standards are too high even now. If this is the choice our public officials think we face, then I must repeat, the situation is very grave indeed.

There are, I fear, no institutional cures for the troubles we are suffering,

since the causes lie in our attitudes. And among these, our attitudes toward time must occupy a central place: attitudes toward the past, toward the present, toward the future.

My impression is that the officials who planned and executed our Vietnam policy these many years had little sense of belonging to a religious or ethical tradition, or a cultural tradition, or to a civilization which was slowly and painfully built up over thousands of years. The overriding operative cognition was instead total obedience to one's bureaucratic superior. This strikes me as spiritual impoverishment, not to say defective understanding of the world we live in.

As a student of the evolution of human society, I am struck by the religious, cultural, and technical achievements of the last ten thousand years. One need not be religious in a strict sense to appreciate the magnificence of man as a physical creature, even, as an engineering triumph. One must be similarly impressed by the civilizations he has created: not only books, literature, and art, but the slow ascent from physical barbarism too. Stone, iron, copper, bronze; fire; the wheel; domestication of plants: all these steps, developing slowly, depending one upon the next, taking millenia to accomplish. As occupants of these splendid bodies, and custodians of the legacy of thousands of years of tortuous upward movement, we have a special responsibility toward the past. Men who stood in awe of this legacy, and of our own physical selves, could not so lightly have opted for a return to barbarism. For them, instead, the present was everything, of supreme importance.

Yet Americans have long been known as an ahistorical people, a people who left the past behind in the Old World when they began to create the New. Perhaps then we can understand (even if we cannot excuse) a failing in our leaders which only reflects a blindness in ourselves.

No such extenuation, however, applies to the equal disregard of the future which these officials so plainly manifest. While we do not know the prices on the Stock Exchange for next week, we do know that certain broad trends are inevitably taking place. The prudent man adjusts his behavior accordingly. Two centuries ago American leaders were well attuned to this movement of history, and we rightly prided ourselves on being in the vanguard of this movement to a better world.

In Vietnam we have revealed ourselves to be pulling in the opposite direction. Massive and well understood changes have been taking place in Southeast Asia -- as throughout the Third World -- on which the US has tripped and stumbled. What are these changes? Nothing more than demands for greater political and economic equality, resulting by inevitable and scientifically validated relationships from increasing urbanization, literacy, communications, and wealth. Shortsighted French attempts to suppress such demands in Vietnam succeeded only in bringing the communists to dominance in Vietnamese politics, and French leaders were humbled in 1954 like the Bourbons in 1789.

These changes are the same ones which began to rock the West three centuries ago, which crushed or decisively altered the most powerful European kingdoms of the day, and out of which America's own revolution grew. Our traditions dictated that we should honor, not resist, these same changes in Asia. Only pride and a culpable disregard of the inevitable future permitted our leaders to think that they could resist what had humbled the potentates of earlier eras. But resist we did, and American leaders succeeded in radicalizing the opposition in South Vietnam and also in Laos and Cambodia. They too have been predictably humbled for their failure to

understand and adjust to the flow of events.

Ironically decades back American patriots engraved an epitaph for the British soldiers killed at Lexington and Concord. Near the bridge by which was fired "the shot heard round the world," this monument now reads: "They came three thousand miles to keep the past upon its throne." It is tragic to think that in the past two centuries, American leaders have taken it upon themselves to go thrice the distance on the same fool's errand.

One may not, I grant, agree with the shape of the future, though I scarcely see how greater equality insults American traditions. But the prudent man must take it into account in his calculations, especially when he contrives not just his own fate, but that of the public he is sworn to serve. When Henry Kissinger asks, "What kind of a country is this that would let an ally be overrun?" we can only respond, "What kind of leader are you who would commit America's prestige and resources to perpetuating an unjust and oppressive social order in Asia, and lie about it in the bargain? If you have nothing constructive to lend to a process already underway, at least stand back and do not increase violence by interfering."

I claim no credit for this wisdom; it is elementary. Many individual bureaucrats understand that there is an irreversible tide in world events, and that current American policy is only plowing the ocean. The problem is that there are high personal costs attached to arguing this proposition vigorously in the councils of government. How, then, can we make men of power more open to this view? Openness is a trait of individuals; and this is consistent with the view I expressed earlier, that the answers lie in changing our attitudes and perspectives. (As Les Gelb rightly said in the title of an article on Vietnam, "The system worked.")

I confess I am stumped here. In the army we had a saying, "Ride to the sound of the guns." Can we not adopt a motto, and live by it, that we should "ride to the sound of dissent." This would be frankly difficult, but it is urgently necessary. The sociologists tell us that value "dissensus" tends to reduce communications: that we unconsciously tend to blot out communications which do not confirm our views. It is this which we must overcome; some disciplines successfully do. In science, for example, one only learns from disconfirmation. To put it in a more homely way, truth comes only from disagreement.

Sadly, my experiences at the interface between government and those trying to communicate with it show that this principle is not yet in vogue. The incident of Dr. X and General Y which I recounted last time illustrates this; but other incidents show me something else is at stake: character. Let me recount a conversation that took place on my recent visit to the US. While in Washington I looked up an old acquaintance who had spent a number of years in high-level positions in Vietnam and Thailand. He had written books as a result of both assignments and, over lunch at the Cosmos Club, I questioned him about his most recent effort. I knew privately that his health had been wrecked in his last job, his programs thwarted, and the effort he had been charged with retrogressed, not progressed. Yet his readers would never guess that this was the case: so mild were his remonstrances that he would never even gain the attention of officials, much less convince them that something had gone seriously wrong. He agreed, but said it would alienate officialdom to be too frank, and accomplish nothing anyway. His younger and less worldly-wise colleagues often complained to him about what a "dumb government" they advised, but he had to remind them that "even if it's a dumb government, it's the only government we have." And, we conclude from this lesson, if you want to stay in touch with the only government we have, you have to be careful what you say. At least this individual was willing to listen to what

I and others had to say, and he deserves much credit for this attitude. But the tragedy is that he knows a great deal more than he is willing to communicate to the government, even so.

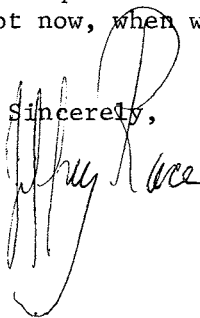
One more example, and then I will stop, of how the quality of communication now seems to rely more on the character of the transmitters than of the receivers. Again, in 1971 I was engaged on a consulting project on Vietnam, this time by a distinguished economist (now deceased) who headed an evaluation team for Secretary of Defense Laird. The conclusion which we came to in our discussions was that American policy was trying to place too many constraints on the Vietnam problem creating an impossible situation. The crucial bind, as I phrased it to him, was that policy-makers had three requirements in mind at one time: (1) the US must withdraw its troops; (2) there must be no internal reform of South Vietnamese society and government; and (3) the Saigon government must not collapse. One of these constraints had to be relaxed, and the Department of Defense simply had to be told it was trying to do the impossible. This information was communicated, but only because the team leader was a personal friend of the Secretary of Defense, and so wealthy that he didn't have to care whether he got no more contracts.

What we must do, then, is obvious, at least at the intellectual level. We must change the character of the receivers so that it is not only wealthy or courageous men who dare to tell them the truth. The genius of the Founding Fathers was creating a system that can be run by ordinary men, not philosopher kings. We must bring this same insight to bear today. How can we make it possible for ordinary men to communicate candidly with one another in the service of the community? Only, I believe, by changing the attitudes of the receivers, so that they have the same outlook as men of science: we only learn from disagreement. And there are ways to do this, if we have the wisdom to see the need for it. The cost of failing to do so will be heavy as future generations look back on us: we will appear not just cruel, though we sometimes are cruel, and not just foolish, though we sometimes are foolish. In the scheme of world history, we will appear ridiculous.

Perhaps some of my readers believe I am a pessimist. This is not true. I believe that the world is a genuinely better place, both physically and spiritually, than it was fifty, or a hundred, or a thousand years ago. The question is, which way will our leaders be tugging in this contest between civilization and barbarism? Answering the question presumes posing it. It is the posing that I urge, and in precisely these terms.

Some of my friends complain that the ideas implicit in this perspective -- trusting our opponents a bit more, being more open, sharing a bit of our good fortune -- are unrealistic, that we have to continue our conservative, secretive, untrusting posture. Honoring the values I have proposed requires some sacrifice, it is true. And so in response, I must pose another question. If not the US, the richest country in the world, then who? If not now, when we are already by far the most powerful and most secure, then when?

Sincerely,



Received in New York on October 23, 1975.