



Interview with Ron Kenner on the Vietnam War

Interview with Ron Kenner by Robert Tung—then Director, Scandinavian Institute for Asian Studies, Copenhagen, Denmark, and main correspondent in Denmark for Asia Magazine, Hong Kong. The interview, 1968-1969, didn't run then and was set aside. Decades later, with possible lessons in mind, it's being posted on this website.

TUNG: Mr. Kenner, I have read some of your articles on U.S. involvement in Vietnam with great interest. Can you explain why this involvement is unjust especially when the U.S. action followed a request from the legitimate government in the South to contain communist infiltration?

KENNER: What is a legitimate government? I believe one good definition of a "legitimate government" is clearly implied in the preamble to the American constitution in the words: "We the people...do ordain and establish this constitution." These words symbolize the principle that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed. Thus constitutional government, by consent of the people, means that if the law is supported only by force—and not by the people—then it is not a law, and it is not a legitimate government. If you accept this definition—supposedly a definition over which America itself fought a revolution to establish—then you may agree that the Saigon government does not appear to be a legitimate government and has not seemed so since the days of French colonialism.

Yet even if I accepted the Saigon regime as a "legitimate government," I would still have grave doubts about the so-called U.S. "commitment" to aid the South. President Nixon's commentaries concerning the U.S. "commitment" have recently [1969] been so vague and contradictory as to appear almost meaningless—particularly since he has been telling the Saigon regime about America's—or the government's—determination to continue the heavy U.S. troop involvement in Vietnam while simultaneously telling the American public about a determination to deAmericanize the war.

On the subject of "commitment," former President Johnson has stated, for the record, "We stand by the Geneva Agreements of 1954"—but these seem to me surprising words. Surprising for a number of reasons, none the least, of course, being America's apparent refusal to allow the people of Vietnam to elect their own government in 1956—probably because the late Ho Chi Minh held the overwhelming support of the Vietnamese people and would have won the election, as observed by the late President Dwight Eisenhower, General Douglas MacArthur, U.S. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas and many others.

The International Commission for Supervision and Control in Vietnam (represented by India, Poland and Canada as appointed by the Geneva Accords) reported in 1956 shortly before the election deadline: "While the Commission has experienced difficulties in North Vietnam, the major part of its difficulties has arisen in South Vietnam (with the American-installed Diem regime, a regime which eventually even lost America's support, and then immediately collapsed).

Now supposedly the Control Commission is a fairly reliable source, all difficulties considered, since the U.S. administration itself has in the past relied upon the commission's reports, even quoting them in its official "White Paper" to the American public on Vietnam. And so, even recognizing that North Vietnam has also violated the Geneva Accords (although it seems to me that if Ho Chi Minh was as popular as President Eisenhower and others believed then the North would not have wished to provide any excuse to postpone or cancel the election)—I am perplexed as to why America should be obliged to honor only some "commitments" and not others such as the U.S. commitment not to interfere with the elections for reunification of Vietnam as promised by the Geneva Accords. Reunification may be just a word to many Americans but to many Vietnamese it can mean, among other things, reunification of husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, parents and children.

Now the late Ho Chi Minh—who turned to communism after the U.S. refused him aid in his nationalist war against the colonizing French—may not have offered the best form of government according to American opinion. Nonetheless a refusal to allow an agreed upon

election, obviously for fear of its outcome, seems to me a violation of America's commitment to democracy as well as to the Geneva Accords.

In September 1963 the late President John F. Kennedy made a commitment when he said of the South Vietnamese, "In the final analysis it's their war—they're the ones who have to win it or lose it. We can help them, give them equipment. We can send our men out there as advisors, but they have to win it."

Kennedy's statement clearly implies that a government that cannot win its own war, on its own land, while fighting with its own people, does not have the support of its people and should not be regarded as a legitimate government. Surely no one today would suggest that the half million or so American troops in Vietnam now are "advisers."

Is it an American War, an undeclared war that in itself may be a violation of democracy without the approval of congress? Any justification for American involvement on the basis of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution—which followed the alleged North Vietnamese attack on the U.S. Destroyer Maddox—has certainly come into question since the captain of the Maddox himself has now publicly doubted the attack on his acknowledged spy ship, a ship in the neighborhood of South Vietnamese naval vessels that only shortly before had been shelling North Vietnamese radar installations. Shortly before former President Johnson announced he would not seek reelection, some U.S. congressmen were questioning a 50 percent increase in U.S. troop strength, coincidentally announced on the day the Destroyer Maddox began its slow cruise up the North Vietnamese coast, not to mention the convenient transfer of U.S. planes to Thailand for the Gulf of Tonkin bombing [just prior to the incident].

The answer that is commonly given to such questions is that American and other allied forces are required to help fight "outside aggressors" that have infiltrated and continue to infiltrate into South Vietnam. Yet as late as January of 1963 the U.S. was able to provide the Geneva Control Commission with only 179 weapons of communist origin that had been captured over an 18-month period, an amount that would not adequately outfit one battalion and which represents less than 2 ½ per cent of the normal amount of weapons captured over an 18-month period, according to U.S. intelligence reports.

Even as late as February, 1966, former U.S. Secretary of State Dean Rusk told the American Senate Foreign Relations Committee during questioning: "I would suppose that 80 per cent of those who are called Viet Cong are or have been Southerners. And that the North Vietnamese ethnic people might be in the percentage of about 20, although they play a very important role."

Even allowing the significance of the 20 percent, it also seems

significant that the SEATO treaty, commonly referred to as the most technical justification of the U.S. commitment, does not acknowledge a boundary line between North and South Vietnam over which the "aggressors" are supposed to infiltrate. The Saigon regime has not even signed the SEATO treaty, and former President Johnson had emphasized that the 17th parallel is provisional and "not in any way to be interpreted as constituting a political or territorial boundary."

Despite regional differences, it seems to many Americans that Vietnam is one country, one culture with one language; one people, with husbands and wives still separated from north to south. But even overlooking the contradiction of "infiltration" over a non-existent boundary, which may be a moot point, I cannot so easily overlook the fact that such "infiltration" has largely followed the refusal to hold elections and the subsequent acceleration in American troop forces. Particularly the "infiltration" has *followed* (according to U.S. Intelligence statistics) the acceleration of American of American bombing. For those who have any doubts, this is recorded amply in the book, *The Politics of Escalation*.

If one wishes to deny that Vietnam is really one country with common interests, and to regard the North Vietnamese as "outsiders," it may be noteworthy that there are far more Americans in South Vietnam [1969] than there are North Vietnamese fighting forces there. Overlooking this fact, the reported 20 per cent assistance in South Vietnam from the North as late as 1966 represents far less outside aid than the Americans had from the French during the American Revolution.

TUNG: Many hold the opinion that if Vietnam falls, the whole of the Southeast Asia will go to the communists. In view of what you have said, is it in your opinion that all the other governments in Asia and for that matter in the world, except those under communist rule, become illegitimate as soon as the communists try to take them over by force? Is it your opinion that violence in the name of revolution is a kind of violence that should be welcomed, whereas that containing revolution in the name of democracy is another kind of violence that should be opposed?

KENNER: Even if I accepted the American cause as just in Vietnam, there would seem no point in fighting a losing war which, even by hawkish views, would provide an incentive for more such wars around the world. And the simple fact seems to be that America cannot win the war in Vietnam and moreover may well be losing it, despite the fact that Vietnam represents only about two per cent of Asia.

I agree with the Honorable George F. Kennan, former U.S.

Ambassador to communist Yugoslavia, that "Any total rooting-out of the Viet Cong from the territory of South Vietnam could be achieved, if it could be achieved at all, only at the cost of a degree of civilian suffering, generally, for which I would not like to see this country responsible."

Even if one were convinced that the ends justify the means in sacrificing Vietnam in the process of rooting out the Viet Cong (which we seem to be doing), I do not see why this condition should be appreciably different elsewhere in Asia.

The domino theory simply is not credible, and even Europeans who have suffered the invasions of Hitler's storm troopers have often taken an almost bemused view of such theorizing, particularly as it might affect America, unless one can imagine a Viet Cong Navy or Air Force challenging America on American territory. Even the non-communist government of "next in line" Thailand has recognized the limits of the domino theory and not too surprisingly, perhaps, has actually welcomed the removal of U.S. troops from Thailand.

Few Asians, or even Europeans, are convinced that the ends justify the means in sacrificing Vietnam in the process of rooting out the Viet Cong and protecting a corrupt government. The argument that the ends justify the means has been used before, by Stalin, by Adolph Hitler—for whom Vice President Ky has expressed his admiration—by the present Russian government in trying to justify its ruthless invasion of Czechoslovakia—and by others. But there are too many millions who know better and that is why there is so much opposition to this brutal war, throughout the world and even in America. The student revolt will continue so long as the war continues.

Throughout the eons of history there has always been a "just cause" to sacrifice the principles and the justice of today for the promises of tomorrow, but in Vietnam even the promises are missing; for there can be no promise for a land that is being slowly but surely obliterated from the face of our earth. That is where our "commitment" is taking us. If there is such a great fear of a communist takeover throughout Asia, one cannot help but wonder why so little of Asia is actually involved in the Vietnam war, although one might speculate with author Alex Campbell that non-communist Asians, "seeing what our military power is doing to South Vietnam, will think twice before invoking our aid; or that Americans will think twice about getting into another Vietnam."

As well, I am not convinced that a show of America's willingness to fight will prevent future guerrilla wars such as there now is in Vietnam. Impressive displays of American valor in World War II, such as Iwo Jima, did not prevent the Korean War, and Korea did not prevent Vietnam.

If one is simply concerned about keeping violence to a minimum, then perhaps one should speculate about the dangers of America's continued presence of bases in small countries such as Thailand along China's border. The patience of the Chinese so far—despite their verbalizations—has been rather surprising when one considers that the U.S. refused to tolerate Soviet missiles in Cuba and that Russia would not tolerate nearby U.S. bases. Thus despite the anxieties of the Western World, and despite the largely verbal competition by China for the communist leadership of the underdeveloped world, the much-feared "communist takeover" throughout the world—predicted for many years now—has failed to come about, either through physical subversion or through the force of communist ideology. In fact, about the only places where guerrilla wars have actually flourished—and significantly increased popular support for communism—has been in such places as Vietnam where the peasantry becomes infuriated with near pathological attempts to stamp out communism—bombing in the process women and children and peasants in the neighborhood, confiscating one's property and moving one into "strategic hamlets" and jailing the non-communists who advocate peace. Those who refuse this imposition are often left with an alternative of siding with the Viet Cong, and since the Americans often cannot distinguish between the "enemy" and the people then the American enemy has to a great extent become the people of Vietnam.

I do not like violence and I do not like communism, but I do not think that the people of the developing nations of the world are going to sit idly with their hands folded while they live in poverty and die young of malnutrition while a comparative few live in riches and comfort—like Diem's wife, Madam Nu, who not many months ago bought a bank in Paris. The refusal of the Saigon government to have a meaningful land reform has caused many people to go hungry, a form of physical violence which in itself can only breed more violence. It was a refusal to hold land reform that primarily brought on the Mexican revolution.

Lin Piao, who may be Mao's successor, has noted (a statement commonly overlooked) that "every revolution in a country stems from the demands of its own people" and that "their role cannot be replaced or taken over by any people from outside"—perhaps giving fair warning to ideological followers that they are on their own. But I am not sold on the thesis of revolution. Violence is a crime against man, and as we know from history the only outcome of many revolutions has been that a lot of people get killed and a few people change palaces.

I have been told by some that communists are responsible for the Negro riots in Watts and Harlem and other cities in America, but

even former President Johnson's advisory committee on the race riots denied such nonsense. I have been to Watts and Harlem and these other cities and I know that many Negro children are bitten in the dark in their slums by 10 and 12 pound rats, sometimes fatally, while Congress has in the past refused to appropriate money for rat poison, and that such conditions cannot be overlooked while looking for the causes of revolt.

I despise such actions as the tyranny of Stalin, Russia's oppression of the Hungarian uprising and now Russia's oppression of Czechoslovakia, China's oppression of its intellectuals and upper classes, the present purges in Poland, the torture in Greece and so on to all the other forms of oppression from South Africa to the ghettos of America and to the Indian reservations of America where the Indian has a life expectancy of 42 years and is taught in school that Columbus discovered America.

I do not think the world can be hoodwinked into blaming dissatisfaction with fascists and dictators on communism. I do not think we can use communism as a scapegoat as Hitler used the Jews. In Vietnam, I think revolution is a better explanation of what is happening than are the claims of a communist takeover for the sake of a land grab—particularly since the Saigon government has not instituted any meaningful land reform in years. I think if we want to avoid the violence of revolution, then we must eliminate the terror, the horror, the corruption and the violence of oppression which breeds revolution and forces the peoples to turn to communism for assistance.

TUNG: You have said that it is better to live under communism than to be bombed to death. It is true, theoretically as well as practically. However, hundreds of thousands of people have fled from communist rule and many more are trying to do so, even at the risk of their lives. How would you explain this? I have heard many people say that communism is good in this and good in that. Honestly I am one of them. But when asked whether they would like to live in a communist dominated society, almost without exception they said "communism is not suitable for me personally." Am I rash to conclude that communism is good when looked from outside and not when actually living under, or to put it another way, freedom (since it is the crucial point whether communism can be accepted) bears no value when one has it? It is therefore easy for people living outside communism to say that communism is more acceptable than being bombed to death. It seems to me as simple and as pathetic as the statement that "since death is the end of life, I choose prison and torture."

KENNER: From my position on the outside, I do not take a favorable view of communism. But still I am not convinced of the view espoused by such advisors as Walt Rostow that the communist powers have a diabolic aim of a "world order, dominated from a single center, of nations forced into a single mold." It has been observed by many that the Sino-Soviet split effectively refutes such a thesis, and I might add it seems to me that the communist countries have great difficulty in even getting together on a single meeting. The communist parties in Italy, Denmark and many other countries strongly condemned Russia, for example, for its invasion of Czechoslovakia, despite the fact that Russia offered many of the same reasons for its involvement in Czechoslovakia that American government officials have given for America's involvement in Vietnam.

The talk of communist expansionism or even of communism seems vague to me, frankly, unless it is specified whether the reference is to the late Ho Chi Minh, the NLF, China, Russia, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, Poland, Cuba or so on. Insofar as Vietnam is concerned, a reading of the constitution of the Saigon regime shows it to be, on the record at least, far less democratic than the constitution of the NLF. In the South, where over a near-hundred year period the French built more prisons than schools, torture is still a common complaint. Millions of us have seen in the newspapers and on television the Saigon regime's execution in the streets, and it is well known that in the south thousands of political prisoners have been jailed without trial, and often their only crime has been to advocate peace.

If the people are mistaken in their vote, then they themselves will have to pay for their mistakes. But I believe they are entitled to a government of their own choice even if this be a communist government led by someone like Ho Chi Minh whose popularity seems so feared in the west. Some have argued that by not allowing communism to come about through elections, that eventually democracy will prevail; but even an honest democracy is not likely to work without the support of the people, and meanwhile it seems to me a strange kind of democracy that holds elections only when convenient—or, as in the case of the last South Vietnamese election, where only the "acceptable" candidates can seek office and where millions are not allowed to vote.

As to the flow of persons from north to south, it is apparent that many people are not satisfied with communism—although many of these persons have been refugees escaping from American bombing, and others are reported to be infiltrators and still others are seeking to rejoin their families. At the time of the "temporary" partition between North and South Vietnam, many thousands of Catholics fled to the South, although it is noteworthy that according to U.S. sources

these persons were given land and assistance with the movement costing as much money or more per person as is the annual income per person elsewhere in Vietnam. These Catholics may have preferred the southern government, but others have questioned the wisdom of supporting a Saigon regime headed by a Catholic northerner in a largely Buddhist land. President Kennedy, himself a Catholic, abandoned Diem after his oppression was symbolized by the Buddhist uprising and Buddhist suicides—certainly these suicides were not communist plots. Still I am not questioning the unpopularity of communism among many peoples of the world. The fact that a commonly unpopular ideology could flourish in South Vietnam only implies that it has had a helping hand from the Americans and from the Saigon regime.

TUNG: What is the essential aim of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam if it is not to save the rest of the world from a communist threat.

KENNER: I believe America's foreign policy is largely predicated on the thesis of the preservation of the status quo, whether that means opposing communism or whether that means opposing revolution or whether that means defending opulence and corruption as a necessary evil accompanying dictatorships and unpopular governments. This is perhaps to be expected since a threat to the status quo is a threat to America which, although it has only about six per cent of the world's population, actually controls or enjoys from 50 to 75 percent of the world's resources and riches. Now I am not saying unequivocally that it is a crime to be wealthy, but it is sheer idiocy to presume that the world is going to stand still—even at gunpoint—while 40 per cent of the world is near starvation or starving and while the great majority of the world's population is earning less than \$300 a year.

While I share concern about the threat of uprisings throughout the world and the violence that comes with such uprisings, I do not think the example of Vietnam will serve to prevent such uprisings. On the contrary, I think the example of Vietnam is making America one of the most hated nations in the world, a country that will spend \$500,000 to kill one Viet Cong when he might not have become a Viet Cong if he had had a piece of land and enough rice for his family—a country that spends about \$30 billion a year to support an unpopular government in Saigon while it spends only about \$200 million a year to aid the Asian development bank.

It is apparent that America (while doing little to ease tensions with China) has a great fear of China, perhaps compounded by our guilt feelings over our refusal to recognize China in the United Nations, and that America intends to maintain bases with the idea of

containing China, despite the high cost of the Vietnam War—a war that has already almost brought the world to the brink of bankruptcy—and despite the threat of a major involvement with China that could well lead to World War III.

As Senator William Fullbright has feared, I too fear that in Vietnam America has stepped into a colonial war in 1950 on the wrong side.

TUNG: The war in Vietnam is becoming increasingly unpopular. Is the U.S. prepared to escalate the war further at the expense of her otherwise good image in Asia as well as in the whole world? And what significance do you attach to the current peace efforts in Paris?

KENNER: I think for some time now the cost of the war has been affecting the middle class of America as well as the poorer classes, and the more articulate middle class has more and more been crying "ouch." Former President Johnson realized this when he announced he would not seek the reelection to the presidency because he was a "lame duck" president who did not have the support of the American people for the continued use of American force in Vietnam. Johnson was also facing a full scale revolution by a great many congressmen furious over having been misled concerning the Gulf of Tonkin "attack." Nor does President Nixon currently have the majority support of the American people for the continued use of American force in Vietnam. I do not regard myself as radical when I say that former President Johnson and President Nixon have not told the truth to the American public about Vietnam, and that the public has been led to support an accelerating war without being given a good explanation why. Prior to the beginning of the Paris peace talks I said they would be unlikely to lead to peace for a very long time, and my opinion on this has not changed.

To illustrate why I believe it is difficult to judge from words: According to a U.S. "White Paper," a report by the International Control Commission (Poland dissenting) in July 1962 was referred to as stating that the North had in specific instances violated the Geneva Accords by sending men and material South. However, the U.S. State Department nowhere mentioned that the same report also condemned South Vietnam and the U.S. for violating the Geneva Agreements by entering into a military alliance. The U.S. was allowed at the time of the 1954 cease fire agreement to maintain a maximum of 684 troops in South Vietnam, but was criticized by the commission which reported it then had about 5,000 troops in South Vietnam. The commission also criticized the U.S. and South Vietnam (Saigon regime) for interfering with the commission efforts to check on imports of arms, another violation of the Geneva Accords which

former President Johnson said "We stand by." While some oversights might be understandable, to offer the benefit of the doubt, it is frankly amazing that from the U.S. *White Paper* one would never know that the Geneva Accords called for elections to be held in 1956 to reunify the country.

Similarly, while the threat to Khe Sanh seemed to be at its peak the president offered assurances that America would not use nuclear weapons, yet America has contracted for (at that time) and is still continuing extensive research into the possible effects of the Vietnamese terrain on nuclear detonations. I wonder if they've given as much concern to the effects of nuclear detonations on the Vietnamese terrain. Similarly we are told that the gasses used in Vietnam are harmless, although most any child should be able to figure out that the danger of a gas depends upon its concentration and that gas concentrated in hideaway holes can be lethal, as in the case of an Australian "ally" who was accidentally killed by one of these "harmless" gasses.

The view that the Saigon government has not and does not now enjoy the support of the Vietnamese people has been held by many millions in America alone, including many of national stature such as the late Robert Kennedy, the late Nobel Peace Prize winner Dr. Martin Luther King, U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman J. William Fullbright, former U.S. Ambassador to India John Kenneth Galbraith and many others. But it is clear that the military men have had the greatest influence on the past and present administration, and that these administrations have so far not been swayed much in the course of conducting the war. President Nixon got many of his votes as a war protest against Johnson and Humphrey, just as Johnson was elected in large part out of fear of Barry Goldwater accelerating the war.

TUNG: Is there any other alternative except war to check communist expansion, or to root out the rebellious ideas in the mind of the Asians?

KENNER: When I spoke with Dr. Nguyen Thi Hue, one of two women to serve on Premier Ky's Provisory Committee to Draft Election Laws for South Vietnam, I think she provided perhaps the best answer to this question. She noted that when a woman once objected to a peace move by President Abraham Lincoln, Lincoln replied, "Don't I destroy my enemies by making them my friends."

Because of "the suffering going on in Vietnam, in the South as well as the North, and because we are all members of the human race, we could put an end to the killing," she said.

She said the United States should help rebuild Vietnam, North

and South, "in a positive test, in a constructive way, and show what Democracy could do."

"The North Vietnamese are stubborn, but we can change them too. Not with beating, not with bombing, but with love, health and welfare."

The noted Buddhist poet Thich Nhat Hanh has asked the question that perhaps more Americans ought to be asking: "If we kill men, what brothers will we have left? With whom shall we live with then?"

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