Talk Before a Group of American Experts at Michigan State University.....

I am going to speak of South Viet Nam and of what you are going to see there.

Ten years ago, in spite of the war, and of Japanese occupation, South Viet Nam was a peaceful and favored country with plenty of food and fertile green land, where people were never cold or hungry.

In 1944, in a few months, about one million and a half Vietnamese died from starvation in North Viet Nam (about three times as many American casualties during the whole second world war) because they were cut off from the rice bowl of South Viet Nam by allied bombardments...

But South Viet Nam was still enjoying peace and plenty in spite of Japanese occupation and of a few bombs dropped in Saigon and destined for the Japanese.

South Viet Nam began to suffer from hatred, war, destruction, and insecurity only on September 23, 1945, when the war had just ended for the rest of the world.

Why? because General de Gaulle ordered a French expeditionary corps to re-establish French sovereignty in Indo-China in spite of two friendly messages sent by Emperor Bao Dai on August 20, 1949 to General de Gaulle and to President Truman warning them of the determination of the Vietnamese people never again to fall under French rule in any form whatsoever and earnestly asking them to remember the principles of the Atlantic Charter so that all the inhabitants of Viet Nam, native and foreign alike, may not be deprived of the peace and joy which were dawning for the rest of the world.

These messages were sent on the same day that General de Gaulle went to the United States and conferred with President Truman on the future of Indo-China. They were ignored because Viet Nam was only known here as a French possession and General de Gaulle was given a free hand to start what seemed to be only a short military promenade, but turned out to be an eight year war and a disaster for Viet Nam, for France, and the whole Free World.

Bao Dai received no answer to these messages and abdicated five days later.

Why? because the Vietnamese threw themselves into the arms of the Viet Minh without knowing them, in the wrong belief that they had American support and were really what they pretended to be, that is--a nationalist league for Vietnamese independence!

After the Japanese surrender, American prestige in Asia was so great, that the Viet Minh were swept to power in Viet Nam by the atomic blast in Hiroshima, as a mere consequence of the Allied victory and almost in the same way as
de Gaulle in France or Tito in Yougoslavia, only because they had received a few arms, a small subsidy from the Allies, and cigarettes and leaflets of encouragement from American planes!

The Indochinese war started on September 23, 1945, when 1400 French soldiers, who had been disarmed and imprisoned by the Japanese during the Second World War, received from the British, arms and also permission to reoccupy the public buildings and offices in Saigon.

They met no resistance because the Vietnamese and the Viet Minh had no army and almost no arms to oppose them at that time, but that first act of reconquest immediately provoked an outburst of hatred and violence and started a long period of destruction, war and insecurity which even now is not yet completely over.

The same day, Tran van Giau, the so-called Viet Minh "commander-in-chief", a communist and former collaborator of the French secret police, ordered all the Vietnamese to destroy Saigon, to leave it to the French as a "heap of ruins and ashes", and ... prudently fled to North Viet Nam to become there ... the propagandist-in-chief of Ho chi Minh!...

His order could not be carried out but, two days after, about one hundred and fifty French civilians were shamefully slain in Saigon by the inflamed populance; and isolated French colonists could no longer live in the countryside.

Even Vietnamese suspected of being pro-French were arrested and killed by the Viet Minh. And there began a period of guerilla warfare and sabotage which has more or less cut off the rural population from the protection and control of the government.

Until the Geneva armistice, almost all the countryside in South Viet Nam was controlled either by the Viet Minh or by the three sects (the Cao Dai, the Hoa Hao, and the Binh Xuyen) that had been armed by the French to fight the Viet Minh and had thus been given spheres of influence to defend ... and to live on!

Thus was created in South Viet Nam, at a time when the French preferred to divide and rule, a kind of a middle age feudalism with which they tried to oppose communist expansion and which is now the main problem to be solved by the national government of Free Viet Nam. This is still a cause of insecurity in some areas.

It is clear that feudalism cannot stop communism. I am confident that most of the leaders of the sects themselves have enough patriotism to understand it and that a way will soon be found to smooth the differences and to integrate the sects into the national life and the national army. The most important of them, the Cao Dai, is already with the Government and most of the Binh Xuyen, who openly rebelled against the Government have also rallied to it. American financial aid may be needed to solve the problem of integrat-
ing the private troops of the sects into the national army or resettling into
civilian life, the men to be released.

These are the causes of the poverty and of the uneasy and troubled atmosphere
you are going to witness in South Viet Nam. You are going to see much poverty
in a country which was very rich and which still has great natural resources.

This poverty will be the greatest barrier between you, the rich, and the
population, the poor. Do not forget that some of those poor men who now
cannot afford to invite you to their homes, because they have no more homes,
were rich a few months ago, and chose to be poor and free. About seven hundred
thousand of us have abandoned everything to choose the Free World, to side with
you. And their complete ruin has impoverished even those of us who have not
directly suffered from the loss of half of our country. So, be careful not to be
inclined to resemble the rich man as portrayed by La Bruyere, the rich man
who speaks loud and spits far. Remember that a great number of those poor
men are intelligent, well educated, proud and sensitive.

Because of this first barrier between you and the Vietnamese, you will have
to spend most of your time with the French. I know that you will weigh carefully
all their advice and opinion. But when you always hear the same bell hour after
hour, day after day, month after month, it is very difficult not to believe it, and
this explains why some of your diplomats and press correspondents have repeat-
ed the same sounds and the same errors.

There is another danger: you may be tempted to replace the French colonial
authorities.

Of course, you will not have the same legal power as they had, but you will
soon discover that your advice has great weight, that it means a great deal of
money and, consequently, of power; you will soon discover that, as mere con-
sultants, you are indeed Very Important Persons. You will probably be flatter-
ed. Be very careful not to be spoiled!

The second barrier between you and the Vietnamese will be the difference
of language: most of the educated Vietnamese speak French, but do not under-
stand English, and the very few who understand and speak English are not al-
ways the most intelligent, the most educated, the most reliable. I confess that
ten months ago, I did not speak English at all and could not even order my break-
fast! So, be careful not to take your future interpreter as a great man nor as a
very outstanding Vietnamese and do not be inclined to judge the whole Vietnamese
society from the very few who happen to speak English.

And you will be discouraged sometimes, by many defects in our administration
and functionaries. But, do not judge from them, the whole Vietnamese people.
For, they were improvised, most of them, in years of faked independence, by
puppet governments almost boycotted by the population, with mediocre intriguers
sometimes at the top and the most competent and honest men often outside or at
the bottom!
A complete reorganization and reshuffling of our administration would have been made if the government of Premier Ngo dinh Diem had not been kept so busy always fighting for its life!

* For all those reasons, the true Vietnamese world will remain hidden to you: the great mass of the people, all those who do not speak English or French, but are nevertheless the strength of the Vietnamese people, the irrepresible strength of an old, civilized, and tough race; courageous, intelligent and tough enough to reconquer their national independence from the Chinese in the 9th century, to defeat the Mongol hordes of Kublaikhan in the 13th and to storm the French at Dien Bien Phu in the suicidal Kamikaze manner on May 7, 1955!...

For we have to remember that the Indochinese war was not won for the communists by the Russians, nor by the Chinese, but by the Vietnamese themselves against overwhelming superior material strength, and that most of those heroic small fighters were not even communist! They had been pushed into the arms of the communists because the Free World had failed to understand that they had the same hunger for freedom as the French and the Americans, the same passion for national independence; they reacted in the Indochinese war exactly as you did when you sided with Staline and the Communists in World War 2 to fight first what seemed to be the most pressing danger to your freedom.

Their victory, alas! only profited their communist leaders, they are themselves the first victims of that victory and we have now to repair the harm done by their error and our own. We have to work together, Vietnamese, French, and Americans, to save what is left of Viet Nam.

We shall surely succeed because we now have everything needed to solve all the economic, social, political and military problems of South Viet Nam: a genuine Vietnamese independence, not the false one that pushed so many nationalists into the arms of the communists; a true national government and no longer a puppet one; a country temporarily impoverished but with great and almost untapped natural resources; an intelligent and courageous population; enough peace to reorganize and train a nationalist army without having to ask for the maintenance in Viet Nam of a strong foreign army that frightened so many Vietnamese into the ranks of the Viet Minh; the protection of the Manila Pact; direct American aid, with France becoming at last, a friend and ally of Viet Nam instead of trying to be her master again; and a better understanding of the problem.

Indeed, with your aid, we shall surely win the battle for Freedom in Viet Nam.

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