

HOW CPR COULD HAVE AVERTED THE VIETNAM WAR

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This time of year thirty years ago in the United States was a season of shock, anguish and humiliation for that nation. The portentous feeling that the most powerful military power on earth was losing the war against an underdeveloped peasant society in Southeast Asia could no longer be denied. This was the aftermath of the so-called Tet Offensive of late January to early February 1968, that lightning attack launched by some 67,000 communist troops in over a hundred towns and urban cities in South Vietnam, including Hue and Saigon. In the heavily secured capital, a Vietcong commando unit penetrated the US Embassy itself, as if to send the communists' message that no place in South Vietnam, even the lion's den, was safe from their strike forces. If Tet was meant to jolt Americans out of Washington's reassuring rhetoric about "the light at the end of the tunnel," it certainly worked. Public opinion in the States clamored overwhelmingly in favor of de-escalation or outright withdrawal; the US government gave in to domestic and international pressure and finally accepted to sit down and negotiate with the enemy. And not least, President Lyndon B. Johnson, one of the biggest victims of the Tet Offensive, was forced to renounce his bid for a second term. From then on until the final debacle of late April 1975, it was all downhill for the US. The cost of the war in terms of human lives was staggering: at least 55,000 American casualties, and over one million on the Vietnamese side. I will spare you with the familiar statistics on hundreds of thousands of orphans and cripples the war left behind, the millions of hectares in farmland rendered useless by napalm and land mines, etc. And since I have no personal knowledge of the matter, not being an American, I won't dwell on the equally well-known theme of "the scars which Vietnam left on the American psyche"; but you know what I mean.

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The Americans' trauma of 1968 is now largely forgotten, of course. US-Vietnamese diplomatic relations have since been normalized. But with the Vietnamese today ready and willing to start anew on a socio-political order based on free markets and pluralist politics, in short, with Vietnam crossing over to the very opposite of the ideological paradigm which the revolution was pursuing 30 years ago, the question that comes to mind is: could not the US have spared itself the trouble of this war? Was there no time enough to heed the misgivings of those well-intentioned critics of American policy who warned about the impending tragedy in Vietnam?

This morning's gathering is therefore an opportune time to reflect on the possibility that the costly and divisive Vietnam war could have been avoided, and, with hindsight, to appreciate the fact that one of the first "doves" to counsel US government authorities and public opinion against a misreading of the motives of the Vietnamese liberation movement was a Filipino, our very own Carlos Pena Romulo. As I will suggest in this study, CPR himself was overly inclined to give Ho Chi Minh the benefit of the doubt in matters of ideological commitment. I should add that Romulo's thesis, viz. that Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist rather than a communist, was not that outlandish or eccentric, quite a number of other people, Vietnamese included, have said as much. But then, how does CPR's reputation as a pro-American square with his audacity to argue with US officials and tell them they were wrong about Ho Chi Minh and for that matter even about Asia?

The desire to believe that Ho was non-communist, this honest mistake if we may call it that, had its origins in Romulo's perceptions of the strong yearning, in pre-war Asia, for freedom and national sovereignty. As is well known, CPR's Pulitzer Prize-winning series of analytical articles on the prevalent sentiments of colonized Asian societies quite accurately predicted that should Japan attack its neighbors, the ensuing war would itself intensify the struggle against Western colonialism. The journalist CPR sensed as much in the countries he visited on the eve of Pearl Harbor: China, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Burma and Indochina. But he could not perceive communist sentiments as the dominant ideology in their liberation movements at the time. It was only after the war, he wrote, that "some of the nationalist movements in Asia began to be suffused with influence and to be described as communist-inspired. To be sure, these nationalist movements developed strong leftist strains, reflecting the universal trends."¹

“Leftist” did not necessarily mean communist, as left-of-center leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru or even Sukarno, whom Romulo counted as a close friend, were well aware. But even for the communists among the Vietnamese, CPR found non-hostile, nay conciliatory things to say. Where their struggle was concerned, Romulo argued that it was not so much because of “the intrinsic appeal of communism” but because the communists were identified with first the anti-Japanese, then with the anti-French movement, that “the leadership fell into communist hands.”² Later, in his 1987 book *A Third World Soldier at the UN*, CPR would elaborate: “Ho Chi Minh was not a communist leader until ... US pressure made him one.”³ And furthermore, the so-called Free World was at fault: “The Vietnamese were getting to be communists because they were getting no support from those who were anti-communist. They were not fighting for communism, although they were sympathetic to the communists because the communists were supporting them.”⁴ Romulo later on criticized the Western countries for being tolerant with their own communists while being “extremely suspicious of communism in other regions, to the extent that any liberal or nationalist movements tended to be viewed as subversive to the democratic status quo.”⁵

These unorthodox arguments are best understood in the context of the fluctuating US policy of the 1940s towards Vietnam. Before his death in 1945, Franklin D. Roosevelt had broached the idea of an international trusteeship program for Indochina, which would effectively take the colonies therein away from French control but (as a side effect) promote the idea of the US as the sponsor of freedom and national liberation in Vietnam and other countries still under the colonialist yoke. Quite naturally, Ho’s independence movement enthusiastically responded to Roosevelt’s project, to the point of seeking American support for his armed resistance against both the Japanese invaders and French colonialism. The problem however -- the problem for the US and CPR, but not for France -- was that Ho was also an active and deeply committed communist, not just a leftist; in fact he was one of the founders of the French Communist Party in 1920, and later worked as an operative of the Moscow-based Comintern in charge of Southeast Asia. Official French opposition to the Rooseveltian idea of trusteeship, therefore, made France seem both anti-independence and anti-communist, indeed more anti-communist than the US was at that time. But for as long as World War II lasted, the US was not averse to helping the Vietnamese communist forces (just as it was not averse to cooperating with Mao’s Red Army in China). This united-front concept would later be reprised by Romulo, this time

putting Ho Chi Minh against, in Marxist-Leninist jargon, the “primary contradiction,” i.e. the communist bloc.

In any event, Roosevelt’s demise and the rapid evolution of the balance of forces in postwar Europe marked a shift in US policy towards Vietnam. The trusteeship project for Indochina was quietly shelved, with CPR finding himself fighting a rear-guard battle against the French and their opposition to decolonization for Vietnam. “I must confess,” he told a hearing at the UN on 25 November 1946, “to some embarrassment in trying to hold to the great French nation the mirror of their own glorious history. I feel all the more so because my allusion to the principles of the French revolution may be received with a wry, cynical smile, as if I were talking of ancient and outmoded things.” American support for Ho Chi Minh’s independence movement was revised in favor of the “solution” formulated by the French government, i.e. recognition of the last Vietnamese emperor Bao Dai, as the nominal leader of the Vietnamese nation but a nation still under French control.

Bao Dai was the powerless, discredited “playboy” sovereign who represented the last anti-Communist leadership that could be found by the French. But in pushing for the Bao Dai solution, the French government knew that the post-Roosevelt dispensation in Washington could not and would not refuse to support France because henceforth the priority for US foreign policy, as articulated by the so-called “Six Wise Men” -- Dean Acheson, George Kennan, Robert Lovett, Averell Harriman, John McCloy and Charles Bohlen, all convinced Atlanticists -- was to rebuild Europe and reinforce the Western alliance.⁶ For Washington, trans-Atlantic solidarity now reigned as the paramount consideration, not the interests of a small Southeast Asian national liberation movement headed by a communist at that. In their official valorization of Europe, the Americans specifically needed French support for both NATO and the US program for the postwar reconstruction of Germany, and could ill afford to alienate France by siding with Ho Chi Minh. Besides, the French government was faced with its strong domestic communist opposition at that time; for the US to disown Paris on the Vietnam problem was to strengthen the hand of the French communists, and send the wrong signals to the rest of the Western world. Even the other major Western colonial power in Southeast Asia, Great Britain, was reluctant to encourage the Vietnamese, because of the undesirable effects which such an endorsement would have on its own independence-minded colonies in the region. In short, in the late 1940s

CPR -- the right man with the right message -- had fallen victim to wrong timing.

CPR's "reading" of Ho Chi Minh's intentions as being "simply" nationalist may have been influenced by certain reassuring gestures previously made by the Vietnamese communists. In an apparent move to downplay possible objections to a communist-led national liberation movement, the Indochinese Communist Party (forerunner of the Vietnamese Communist Party) announced its own formal dissolution in 1945. Although short-lived, the US connection certainly helped: America was a potential ally, even an ideological inspiration for Ho's movement. American military officers were present in the proclamation of the so-called Republic of Vietnam on 2 September 1945 in Hanoi. The formal declaration of independence of the new republic did not hide its American parentage: "All men are created equal; they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness," go the first lines of the Vietnamese document. (Only later does the declaration cite the French document Rights of Man and the Citizen, to wit: "All men are born free and with equal rights, and must always remain free and have equal rights.") Finally, the American example of promising eventual independence to their Filipino colonial wards was an encouragement to the Vietnamese resistance: asking for the US' moral support, Ho Chi Minh often told the American military intelligence officer in liaison with him how he wished that the Vietnamese had the same kind of relations with the Americans as the Filipinos had⁷

For these reasons, Ho during the 1940s appeared to CPR and other sympathizers to fit the profile of the simple "patriot" His international image was that of a leader more democrat than Bolshevik, more nationalist in the moderate Nehru-U Nu-Sihanouk mold than a radical Mao Ze-dong or Kim Il Sung. In CPR's judgment Ho was preferable to the French protegee Bao Dai, who represented nothing of nationalist value. Writing in 1950 to Secretary of State Dean Acheson, Romulo contended that the US was wrong in backing Bao Dai, and that American perceptions gave the Vietnamese communists, and the communists alone, the "enormous advantage of being projected as "anti-imperialist" before the Vietnamese masses. Romulo further told Acheson that Ho struck him as "a man who could make all sorts of trouble for Stalin," and as someone who "may not allow himself to be a tool of the Kremlin." Adverting to the increasingly anti-Stalin tendencies of the Yugoslav leader Marshal Tito, CPR asked Acheson: "Suppose now that Vietnamese communism should

assume the shape of Titoism, would the United States still prefer Bao Dai to a Titoist Ho Chi Minh?" This hint of a lesser evil, this appeal to nuanced realpolitik might have swayed Acheson's mind at an earlier time, before the collapse of Chiang Kai Shek's regime, the Chinese communists' victory and the outbreak of the Korean War. But the "wise Man" at the helm of the State Department was apparently not interested in a debate, he did not even bother to acknowledge receipt of CPR's letter (which appended the 1949 *New York Times Magazine* article explaining Ho's nationalist appeal).⁸

A fair extrapolation of CPR's thinking would yield this premise: that the Philippines, in the early 1950s and even through the Cold War, would willingly enter into friendly relations with a communist Vietnam, its Southeast Asian neighbor, as long as it were not a Soviet puppet. In other words, if Vietnam were a "nationalist communist state", as China would not take that long to become vis-a-vis the USSR *a propos*, it is interesting to note that for Romulo, the Chinese revolution bore the stamp of a nationalism that was necessarily anti-Soviet: "China itself is too vast and populous a land, too massive and unwieldy, too heavily overgrown with the traditions of individualism and tolerance to be recast on the iron mold of a doctrinaire ideology." [9] In the same vein, CPR envisioned a future China that would be rid of its acquired Marxist-Leninist praxis and reconciled to its pre-communist habitus.

There will be a time -- a long time it is almost certain -- of internal reorganization and adjustment, of agrarian reforms in government, but the basic characteristics of the Chinese people will reshape instead of being reshaped by the mold of the imported systems.¹⁰

In hindsight, some 50 years later, CPR's prediction seems to have come true in China. Indeed, nationalism as a moving force has been known to confound received ideas about "proletarian internationalism" It would precisely be Chinese nationalism, chafing under Soviet-Russian hegemony in the 1960s, which wittingly or unwittingly forced Vietnam's hand and drove the Vietnamese ruling party closer to the Soviet Union than it would have wished, thus making it lose whatever character of autonomy and equidistance -- that is, in relation to China on the one hand and the USSR on the other -- that it used to have.

Consider the effects, on little Vietnam, of the tug-of-war which pitted the two giants of the communist camp. The Sino-Soviet conflict was a struggle for leadership of the communist world, a protracted duel which put Ho Chi Minh and other Vietnamese communist leaders in a delicate position of having to maintain ties of ideological solidarity -- while appearing non-partisan -- with two feuding allies and sources of moral and material support at the same time that Vietnam was fighting the world's No.1 military superpower. Of the two communist allies, the Soviet Union had an advantage of representing the first Marxist-Leninist state; it was Lenin's homeland; and Ho Chi Minh had always stood by the Kremlin as a matter of principle. But could Vietnam afford to make a clean break with China, the other ally, while it was fighting France, and later the US? Ho Chi Minh's famous testament (1969) eloquently expressed the Vietnamese dilemma: "I have dedicated my life to serving the revolution, so the greater my pride in seeing the growth of the international communist and workers' movement, the more I suffer from the dissensions which divide brother-countries."

The geopolitical factor, I think, clinched the odds in favor of the Soviet Union starting in the mid-1970s. On the one hand China, the one-time suzerain of Vietnam and thus a reminder of Vietnam's first proto-nationalist impulse, gigantic China was Vietnam's immediate neighbor to the north, a permanent presence whose shared ideology with Vietnam did not exactly inspire confidence in Ho Chi Minh's mind, it seems. On the other hand there was the equally huge Soviet Union, but a very safe distance away, and in a position to exert pressure on Vietnam. As a final factor in making Vietnam decide in favor of the Soviet Union, there was the Chinese policy of support for the Khmer Rouges, Vietnam's erstwhile allies who became its detractors and enemies soon after the victory of the Vietnamese communists. After the glorious days of anti-colonial nationalism, it was now the turn of the downside of the post-colonial order, where old resentments against troublesome neighbors easily answered to the name of nationalism. All in all, Asian nationalism proved to be stronger than Marxist ideology; and it seems from the evidence that Marxist-Leninists, whatever be their factional tendency, have failed to provide a universally acceptable, lasting solution to the problem of xenophobia and other manifestations of ethnic exclusivism.

To resume the Asian mood of the early 1950s: Cold War reflexes now dominated the main actors' behavior. Americans were asking themselves: "Who lost China?", perhaps forgetting that some of their so-

called China hands had once described the communists as innocuous “agrarian reformers” For his part, Ho Chi Minh no longer entertained any illusions about Washington’s intentions. His government henceforth identified the US, poised to succeed France as the nemesis of Vietnamese communism, as the main enemy, while downgrading France to a “secondary contradiction” Ho Chi Minh was a genuine communist, after all: the recognition given to his regime first by the newly proclaimed Chinese people’s republic, then by the USSR and other Soviet-bloc states, confirmed it. On top of it all, the Korean war broke out and further deepened the “communist-vs.-capitalist” divide. In the Third World context of the Cold War, nationalism played second fiddle to communism as a defining issue; and even nationalism became suspect in so far as it was felt to harbor anti-American sentiments. Ideological nuances and shadings of gray gave way to the black-and-white manichaeism practiced by John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State who abhorred even the idea of neutralism. The 1950s were also an ideological high tide for Senator Joseph McCarthy, in whose judgment any left-of-center American could only be a “commie”. In Indochina, the US inexorably slid into the role vacated by France: the role, decried by CPR, of the White colonialist. In the anti-communist frame of mind of Washington D.C., a military solution in Vietnam became the inevitable response, the only possible manner in which to engage the enemy. The agonizingly slow and seemingly mindless sinking of the leader of the Western world into the quagmire of Indochina’s swamps and jungles would soon ensue.

CPR’s gallant but ill-fated defense of Ho Chi Minh evokes a number of personal observations which, I would like to stress, have been influenced by the particular configuration taken by the outcome of the Vietnam war. The denouement of the Soviet empire’s crisis in the late 1980s and the ensuing general critique of the Marxist-Leninist paradigm of development also contributed to crystallizing much of the following arguments.

1. A two-stage nationalism characterized the ideological behavior of Ho Chi Minh, and for that matter the behavior of any Communist leader of a national liberation movement of the 1940s-1960s in Asia. In the case of Vietnam, appeals to patriotic sentiments were useful, nay indispensable during the periods when the enemy was clearly a foreign invader; French,

then Japanese, and for a brief period (Kuomintang) Chinese, then French again, and lastly American. In this sense Marx was wrong: contrary to what he proclaimed, nationalism, in Vietnam during the so-called First and Second Indochina wars, was compatible with socialism and even the concept of internationalism. The objective of uniting the alien enemy/enemies was easier to realize using nationalist symbols and discourse, rather than the arcane theories of Marxism which only a miniscule fraction of the population could understand. But when the successive waves of alien invaders were finally defeated and the struggle moved on to the second stage, the (allegedly higher) plane of socialist construction, from 1975 on, nationalism gave way to the imperatives of communist ideology. Development, in communist terms, meant bypassing and/or outrightly suppressing the capitalist phase of socio-economic and political growth. At this point the Vietnamese cause seemed to falter, for not only was Marxism a doctrine of largely European intellectual origin, but even in its "Asianized" version the Marxist developmental blueprint could only aggravate the problem of agrarian backwardness, considering that reunified communist Vietnam had a dysfunctional economy -- due in part to the war -- and relatively underdeveloped political institutions to begin with.

2. The orthodox Marxist rejection of nationalism is indeed well-founded insofar as the class-based approach of Marxism to sociopolitical and economic problems refuses, ultimately or in the final analysis, to be accommodated with the sentimental, emotional and generally unproblematic appeals to ethno-linguistico-religious community and solidarity which are the staple of nationalist discourse. The basic incompatibility of the two **isms** has been amply illustrated in the decline and eventual collapse of the ex-Soviet Union, ex-Yugoslavia, ex-Czechoslovakia and other multi-ethnic or multi-national states founded on Marxist-Leninist principles in the 20th century. Between the two Indochinese states of reunified communist Vietnam and the so-called Democratic Kampuchea, in the late 1970s the same pattern emerged of two ostensibly allied forces sharing a common ideology -- or at least the premises of the same ideology -- which ended up fighting each other, and not just in a verbal mode. I have already referred to the ironic situation of Sino-Vietnamese relations deteriorating to the extent of finally pushing Vietnam into the arms of the Soviet camp, a situation which was quite far from CPR's reading of Ho Chi Minh as "a man who could make all sorts of trouble".for the Soviet giant. This leads me to the last point.