

VIETNAM WAR DIPLOMACY: REFLECTIONS OF A FORMER IRON CURTAIN OFFICIAL

by

JÁNOS RADVÁNYI

Before becoming a US citizen, the author served for 19 years in the Hungarian Diplomatic Service. As Chief of Mission in the United States, he was personally involved in the negotiations between Washington and Hanoi over the Vietnam War, particularly in 1965-66. He gained worldwide attention in 1967 when he requested and was granted political asylum in the United States, becoming the highest ranking official then to have defected from a Warsaw Pact country.

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Among the many misconceptions of our tragic involvement in Vietnam is the naive belief that the war was essentially an American-Vietnamese affair. It was not. The United States was but one of the players in an enormously complex and deadly encounter. Russia and China also had vital roles, while numerous lesser actors—like Poland and Hungary—were peripherally involved. The leaders in the Kremlin, for instance, pursued an “anti-imperialist struggle” against the United States by helping Hanoi to win the war militarily and diplomatically. At the same time, they waged a cold war against “the dogmatist, adventurist, and phrasemongering” Chinese Communists by weaning Ho Chi Minh away from Peking and by rendering the North Vietnamese increasingly dependent upon the supply of sophisticated Soviet weapons. Mao Tse-tung and his colleagues also had axes to grind in Vietnam. They supported Hanoi’s war effort substantially and left no stone unturned in attempting to eliminate US influence in the area. In addition, they persisted in their attempts to contain the

expansionist “Soviet social imperialism.” The arena of conflict thus ranged far beyond the battlefield proper, affecting the strategies, tactics, and power-relationships of the superpowers and widening the Sino-Soviet rift.¹

Another misperception centers on the key figure of the war, Ho Chi Minh. While some Americans saw him as a charismatic leader, but nothing more, others regarded him as the devil’s pawn, if not the devil himself. Inside the communist world, Stalin did not trust him and Khrushchev despised him, but Mao Tse-tung and Tito held him in high regard. Brezhnev was willing to take a chance with him. Some observers held that he was a staunch nationalist communist and that he was close to Moscow. Others maintained that his most intimate ties were with Peking. Some East Europeans held the view that Ho Chi Minh was a lucky man to have survived Stalin’s blood purges—lucky to have been in China and in the Vietnamese jungles while his friends from the Far Eastern Bureau of the Comintern were liquidated one by one.

I met Ho in the spring of 1959 during a

visit to Hanoi. My opinion was and is that he was a shrewd, ruthlessly ambitious, and highly intelligent Marxist colonial revolutionary. He effectively spread communism in Indochina, and under his leadership the Viet Minh guerrillas defeated both the Japanese and the French. This frail man with iron resolve was one of the few party leaders in the communist camp who presided over a Politburo and Central Committee that could claim an extraordinary record of cohesion and consensus. Moreover, he was one of few communist chiefs who, like Yugoslavia's Tito, had come to power after a long and successful guerrilla war rather than as an appointee of Moscow or Peking. And, like Tito, Ho remained neutral during the years of struggle between the two communist giants, and profited from that neutrality. In North Vietnam he installed a closely controlled communist regime, nationalized the banks and the factories, and collectivized the countryside. His secret police hauled off dissenters to lead mines and executed landlords and collaborators with the French colonialists. Ho Chi Minh totally discounted the possibility of a reunification of Vietnam through elections as stipulated in the 1954 Geneva Agreements. In his view, all parties concerned—the North and South Vietnamese, and the Americans as well—knew that an election would result in a communist victory; therefore, no election would be held. The reunification, he maintained, could be effected only through military means. He seemed to believe what he was saying. And indeed at the Fifteenth Plenum of the Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party in May 1959, Ho Chi Minh and his Politburo made the crucial decision to invade the South.²

Frankly, I did not expect that the Americans, having witnessed the bitter experiences of the French, would get involved in a ground war in Vietnam. Nor did I believe that Brezhnev would be interested in Vietnam, which had been abandoned by Khrushchev as a place where the Soviet Union should not waste money and energy. I also thought that neither of the superpowers

would allow itself to become chained to the fortune of a small and relatively insignificant power in Southeast Asia. But I was wrong—things had gone too far for the superpowers to stay on the sidelines. Possibly my miscalculation was due to the fact that during the Khrushchev years, and even at the time of the Tonkin Gulf incident in August 1964, East European party and government officials, including the Hungarians, showed little interest in events in Southeast Asia. The news of the clash between a US naval vessel and North Vietnamese torpedo boats caused hardly a ripple in Budapest and Warsaw, although it should have been obvious that the event portended a change in the character of the war. No one seemed to care about Hanoi's war, about America's role in it, or about the fact that it had become an issue in the American presidential campaign. (For instance, the Hungarian party boss, János Kádár, explained to me in private that he really did not care who was to be elected, Johnson or Goldwater. For him it was the same: they were both imperialists.)

But the indifference ended in 1965, when Soviet party leader Brezhnev put forth his "United Action" plan to support Ho Chi Minh. The Vietnamese, of course, were delighted; but not so the East Europeans, who felt little sympathy toward sponsoring Hanoi's expensive undertaking. Public opinion, however, is not a decisive factor in formulating foreign policy in that part of the world, and despite rising popular dissatisfaction, the Russian plan was endorsed by the governments of Eastern Europe. (The maverick Ceausescu of Romania was the only one who dared to say no to Brezhnev. He sent his contribution to Ho's war directly to Hanoi.) Soon thereafter, food, hospital supplies, construction materials, etc. were flowing by rail and sea from Eastern Europe to Vietnam. The military shipments were handled by the Soviets exclusively. As part of the "United Action" program, the Russians furnished the armed forces of North Vietnam with airplanes, tanks, coastal guns, warships, and other items of military hardware. Soviet specialists installed a web of anti-aircraft

rockets and conventional antiaircraft artillery around North Vietnamese cities and strategic points. They assisted in training pilots, rocket personnel, tank drivers, and artillerymen at Soviet bases. Further, the USSR routed extensive military and economic supplies through Hanoi to the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, commonly known as the Viet Cong.

At the same time, the Kremlin stepped up its anti-Chinese attacks, accusing Peking of obstructing Soviet attempts to get help to Hanoi. According to the Soviets, Chinese advisors persuaded the Vietnamese that men are more effective than machines or weapons, and the electronic equipment sent by the Soviets for air defense batteries was consequently stored for a while in caves. Moscow also "disclosed" that Peking had refused to permit Soviet transport planes loaded with weapons to fly over Chinese territory. Soviet diplomats pointed out that although the Communist Party of the Soviet Union had repeatedly urged joint action by all socialist countries in support of North Vietnam, the Chinese had flatly and stubbornly rejected all such proposals. From this, Moscow affected to deduce that the Chinese leaders were trying to prolong the Vietnam War in order to perpetuate international tension and sustain the image of China as a besieged fortress. In addition, the Soviet leadership asserted that one of the goals of the Chinese with respect to Vietnam was "to originate a military conflict between the USSR and the United States . . . so that they may, as they say themselves, sit on the mountain and watch the fight of the tigers."³ One aspect of this "policy-evaluation persecution complex" was that the Soviet KGB and the Warsaw Pact intelligence agencies were directed to gather evidence of secret Chinese-American collaboration.

Not surprisingly, the Chinese Communists summarily rejected these Soviet charges and countered with charges of their own. They accused the Soviet leadership of "actively plotting new deals" with the United States and other "reactionary forces." They bluntly stated that there was no

shade of difference between Brezhnev and Khrushchev on the questions of the international communist movement and relations with China; "Khrushchevism without Khrushchev" they repeated in their anti-Soviet propaganda. They blamed the "Soviet revisionists" for whipping up hysteria against China, claiming that what exists is what causes differences, and that which should be common is missing. Naturally, they threw responsibility for the Sino-Soviet tension upon the Soviet party leadership. As for Vietnam, Moscow's "United Action" plan was rejected as an attempt to "deceive the world"; the Soviet leadership was denounced for trying to tie the East European socialist countries to "the chariot of Soviet-United States collaboration" in behalf of world domination; and the Soviets were accused of using Vietnam as "an important counter" in their bargaining with the United States, and as a means to isolate, encircle, and attack China.⁴

The Vietnamese in Hanoi, of course, deplored the dissensions that divided Russia

János Radványi is a Professor of History at Mississippi State University, where he has taught since 1971. From 1948 to 1967, he was a member of the Hungarian Diplomatic Service, his assignments including service in Turkey, France, Switzerland, and Syria. He rose to the position of Chief of Mission in the United States, and in that capacity was personally involved in the wartime negotiations between the US and North Vietnam, particularly in 1965-66. Professor Radványi defected to the United States in 1967. He subsequently received a Ford Foundation fellowship and was a Scholar in Residence at the Stanford University Center for Research in International Studies from 1968 to 1970. There he earned the M.A. and Ph.D. degrees; he also holds diplomas from the Academy of Foreign Affairs and the Graduate School of Diplomacy in Budapest. In 1970-71, Professor Radványi was a Lecturer in History at San Francisco State College and a Research Associate at the Hoover Institute on War, Revolution and Peace. He is the author of the books *Hungary and the Super Powers* (1972) and *Delusion and Reality: Gambits, Hoaxes and Diplomatic One-Upmanship in Vietnam* (1978); his articles have appeared in several publications, including *Life*, *The China Quarterly*, and *The Atlantic Monthly*.



and China and expressed continuing concern over the tension created by the family feud. At the same time, they expressed gratitude for the generous and steadily increasing support of the Soviets and the East Europeans and thanked the Chinese for their assistance as well. Indeed, the Vietnamese were able to produce cleverly formulated and well-balanced statements of gratitude and solidarity all around.

Meanwhile, throughout the mounting rancor of the Sino-Soviet dispute, the Soviet press continued its steady castigation of the US role in Southeast Asia and endorsed North Vietnam's war aims as well as its four-point plan to end the war.⁵ Leading Soviet political figures used every occasion that came their way to promise support for the North Vietnamese and the Viet Cong, repeatedly declaring that the Soviet Union was fully prepared to develop better relations between the USSR and the United States, if only the United States would abandon its policy of aggression in Vietnam.

The Chinese propaganda machinery also directed its heavy artillery against the US intervention in the Vietnam War. Its vicious attacks against the American "imperialists" were coupled with encouragement for Hanoi and the Viet Cong to wage an all-out, protracted "people's war." The Chinese leaders' public statements, as well as their opinions expressed in private, differed neither in tone nor in content from those so harshly reported in the news media.

Meanwhile, policymakers in Washington spent considerable time analyzing and judging the militant Chinese and hostile Russian attitudes and actions. Since they were concerned that an abrupt turn in the conduct of the war might trigger an irresponsible Chinese reaction, they tried to avoid any drastic change. They calculated that China would not enter the war unless there was an American invasion of the North beyond the 17th parallel or unless the Hanoi regime was in danger of being toppled. But Washington showed considerable anxiety over Chinese plans for world revolution. In a memorable article entitled, "Long Live the Victory of the People's War," Lin Piao, then heir-apparent

to Mao Tse-tung, announced that China, while emphasizing self-reliance in any "revolutionary struggle," certainly would encourage the outbreak of revolutions among the newly emerging nations.⁶ Several analysts have pointed out that the article reflected the author's concern over domestic power struggles; yet, in his advice to "encircle the cities from the countryside," he referred to North America, Japan, and the Soviet Union as the cities and the newly emerging nations of Africa, Asia, and Latin America as the countrysides. Naturally, the revolution in Vietnam was singled out as the most convincing application of this "encircling theory." Undersecretary of State George Ball considered the Lin Piao enunciation a "do-it-yourself kit" for global revolution, while Dean Rusk compared it to Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. President Johnson thought that it confirmed the notion that if Vietnam fell, others in Southeast Asia would follow.⁷

Peking, at the time, was also making much of a new "anti-American power axis" that was said to be shaping up between Djakarta, Hanoi, Peking, and Pyongyang. There was no doubt that something like cooperation was developing among Indonesia, North Vietnam, China, and North Korea, but the limited consensus among them was a far cry from an axis. Yet, to American eyes, China appeared to be the driving force behind North Vietnam's decision to militarize its strategy and resist any diplomatic solution to the war. This obviously simplistic view was not altered when the Peking-dominated "axis" disintegrated following the abortive coup of the Indonesian communists, nor when the Chinese revolutionary pronouncements were unfavorably received in the Third World and Lin Piao was liquidated as an agent of American imperialism. China watchers in the State Department and in many other quarters of the US diplomatic community still strongly believed that the United States and China were headed for a collision that neither wanted. Yet the plain truth was that Mao Tse-tung could not afford to go to war with the United States. His power base had so dwindled that he had to launch his Great

Proletarian Revolution, marking his greatest power struggle since consolidating control over the Chinese Communist Party in the 1930's.

Just as Chinese intentions were misread in Washington, so were those of the Russians. It was widely believed that the Chinese were the extreme communists while the Soviets were the moderates, favoring a negotiated settlement. Several high officials in the Johnson and Nixon Administrations went so far as to infer that Moscow was "interested" in helping Washington extricate itself from the war. Some in the Western camp, including Ambassador J. Blair Seaborn of Canada, Prime Minister Harold Wilson of Great Britain, and Foreign Minister Amintore Fanfani of Italy, believed that the Russian peace feelers could lead to a negotiated settlement. Of course the solution was not a simple one. On one side of the diplomatic equation stood the North Vietnamese, with their obsessive determination to carry out their aggression and win the war. On the other side stood the Americans, with their aim to assure the survival of a free and independent South Vietnam. Complicating the problem was the nature of the supporting cast—members of the Soviet bloc, who were sending out their peace feelers but standing all the while on Hanoi's side. Thus several questions arose: What was Moscow's true intention—did the leaders in the Kremlin want to end the war with a compromise, or was their real aim to feed the Americans misleading information? Since the Russians and such minor players as the Poles, Hungarians, and Rumanians appeared to act independently, how could the US President or Secretary of State be sure who could be trusted—the Soviets, the Hungarians, the Poles, the Rumanians, or none of them? Were, in fact, the Soviets and their client states acting on behalf of Hanoi and telling fairy tales to Washington?

Surely it would be misleading to state that US leaders were not aware of the hazards and complexities that accompany any dealing with the Soviet Union and its allies. Yet they had to learn the hard way that the Soviet bloc meticulously followed the policy set forth by

Ho Chi Minh and his successor, Le Duan. The Soviets and their allies were ready to mediate between Hanoi and Washington, not with the intent of bringing peace, but only of furthering Hanoi's cause. First and foremost, their efforts were designed to stop the American bombing of North Vietnam in order to provide time for the North Vietnamese to recover and prepare for their next assault on the South. In broader scope, the Soviet bloc was eager to make the American Government appear to its own people and the world to be unwilling to make peace, when in fact it was Hanoi which was committed to a purely military solution.

I was personally involved in one round of these "peace negotiations," which started in the autumn of 1965 and ended in 1966. It was a bizarre adventure in make-believe diplomacy, producing the longest bombing pause, a 37-day Christmas cessation. In this extraordinary example of secret diplomacy, Hungarian Foreign Minister János Péter, a former Calvinist bishop turned communist diplomat, badly misled Secretary of State Dean Rusk. Pretending to speak for Hanoi, he suggested that once the United States halted the bombing, negotiations to end the war would begin. But this self-appointed negotiator fabricated the "peace terms," raising false hopes where human lives were at stake. This Hungarian mediation effort was only one of many peace hoaxes. The KGB had successfully trapped Adlai Stevenson, U Thant, and Eric Sevareid with a bogus peace feeler.⁸ Polish Foreign Minister Adam Rapacki's mediation attempt, the so-called "Marigold Affair," resembled the Péter mediation in some respects, but as a diplomatic ploy it was more sophisticated and was masterfully executed.⁹ He made a tempting offer to the Americans to "prove North Vietnam's readiness for negotiation," while in fact he had nothing firm to offer. He then instigated prolonged Polish-US exploratory talks to obtain concessions from Washington that could be presented as an American position to Hanoi. And finally he made an effort to work out a package deal favorable to Hanoi for the settlement of the conflict.

Ironically, there were moments of

candor, too, in the process of the deception game. For instance, Soviet Premier Kosygin once admitted to US Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson that mediators usually either complicate problems or pretend they are doing something when in fact they are not.¹⁰ On another occasion, when Dean Rusk asked his Soviet counterpart Gromyko about the reliability of the East Europeans, the Russian answered bluntly that the United States should listen only to the Russians.¹¹ But to my knowledge, only once were the Soviets really helpful; in October 1968, Minister Counsellor Valentine Oberenko of the Soviet Embassy in Paris patched up differences over the shape of the conference table at the Paris peace talks.¹²

The four years of Nixon's diplomacy were no more successful than those of the previous administration. It was said that the President and his Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, provided both the Russians and the Chinese with incentives for wanting the war settled. As Professor Morton A. Kaplan remarked: "Their relationship to Vietnam, their competition in Southeast Asia, the effects in Europe and elsewhere were important too in creating those incentives—so that both of them simultaneously put pressure on the North Vietnamese to come to terms with us."¹³ Yet in retrospect it is clear that the new American "global strategy," or, as Kissinger called it, "the diplomatic revolution that had been brought about," had not been working in America's favor. It is true that a semiofficial diplomatic line of communication had been opened up between Washington and Peking. The antiballistic missile systems of Russia and the United States had been limited, and a strategic arms ceiling had been specified. Yet the original aim of Kissinger's "grand design" to resolve the Vietnamese conflict through "global strategy" had not been achieved. Neither the Russians nor the Chinese showed change in their attitudes toward Vietnam. Both communist powers stressed "unflinching" solidarity with the "just struggle" of the peoples of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia "for their freedom,

independence, and social progress" until the very end of the war. And despite the Sino-Soviet rift, both powers unequivocally demanded the withdrawal of US troops from South Vietnam. In addition, even while negotiating with Washington, Peking and Moscow increased their military and economic assistance to North Vietnam to unprecedented levels. In short, Kissinger simply could not cash in on the differences between China and the Soviet Union; the new formula, the "balance of incentive," induced neither the Russians nor the Chinese to pressure Hanoi into ending the war. It was other elements that changed the diplomatic scenario and led to a ceasefire and later to the peace treaty: decisionmakers in Hanoi came to the view that the successful continuation of the war required a "negotiate and fight" period, considering diplomatic negotiation as only another means of achieving final victory; and those in Washington decided not to insist on the withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops from the South.

In January 1973, "An Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring the Peace in Vietnam" was signed in Paris and endorsed by the great powers, including Russia and China. The monitoring of the peace was entrusted to an International Commission for Control and Supervision, with 290 representatives each from Canada, Indonesia, Hungary, and Poland.¹⁴ But after the withdrawal of American troops from South Vietnam and the return of the American POWs, the treaty was constantly violated by both Hanoi and Saigon.

By the end of 1974, the US Congress had cut back considerably appropriations to provide military aid to South Vietnam. At the same time, Moscow increased its arms shipments to North Vietnam, and the Soviet Government advised Hanoi to launch an all-out offensive against the South.¹⁵ The chief of staff of the Soviet armed forces, General Kulikov, traveled to the North Vietnamese capital to review with his Vietnamese friends, Generals Giap and Dung, the details of the offensive. The rest is well known. The invading North Vietnamese Army crushed all resistance. The Thieu government collapsed

like a house of cards. During the last weeks of the war, Hanoi could not believe that the United States would give up a place where it had invested billions of dollars. Through the commanding officers of the Hungarian military contingent of the International Commission for Control and Supervision, Hanoi sent word to the Americans that a last-minute political solution was a real possibility. This bit of make-believe diplomacy, however, was quickly forgotten by the initiators when Dung's tanks rolled onto the streets of Saigon.

Five years ago the helicopter carrying Ambassador Graham Martin left the rooftop of the American Embassy in Saigon. With this final act US direct involvement in the Vietnamese tragedy came to an end. But the United States continued to live under the pressure and humiliation of the lost peace. It engulfed itself in nationwide masochism and mourned about a war which it won militarily but lost politically and diplomatically. It insisted on believing that the villains were Americans themselves, not the "best and the brightest" of the other side. It embraced detente, wanting to believe that the leaders in the Kremlin were genuinely interested in relaxing international tensions, even while Moscow not only extended its sphere of influence all over the world but aided a number of Moscow-oriented communist parties to gain state power in Asia and Africa. The first protégé of the Kremlin was the communist Pathet Lao, which gained control over Laos in 1975. Next in line was the communist Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola, which overpowered two other national Angolan parties in 1976. Then with Soviet, Cuban, and East German assistance, Colonel Mengistu Haile-Mariam eliminated his fellow-traveler colleagues and installed a staunch communist regime in Ethiopia in 1977. The same year, Marxist Samora Machel of Mozambique, supplied with Chinese and Soviet weapons, took over that African state. In 1978, two bloody Moscow-directed coups were carried out, one by the veteran communist Nur Muhammad Taraki in Afghanistan, the other by the

communists in South Yemen, who eliminated their former ally, President Salim Rubay'i 'Ali, and established a stronghold on the tip of the Arabian peninsula. Finally, Hanoi, again with Soviet help, installed a puppet government in Cambodia. Meanwhile the United States, paralyzed by post-Vietnam trauma, was unable to respond to the Soviet advances and accepted the changes in the status quo as facts of life. Not until the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan did policymakers in this country express serious concern about the growing appetite of Soviet imperialism.

Perhaps now, after the events in Afghanistan and Iran, the Vietnam-ment American society will at last come together. Perhaps the severely damaged relations between the United States and a number of its allies will be repaired, and people around the world will come to count again on the strength and reliability of American commitments. Perhaps the era of the Vietnam syndrome will finally be over, and, in place of empty rhetoric, the US Government will demonstrate the force and resolve to counter communist expansion.

NOTES

1. Part of the material of this article appeared in somewhat different and more extended form in my book: *Delusion & Reality: Gambits, Hoaxes & One-Upmanship in Vietnam* (South Bend, Ind.: Gateway Editions, 1978).
2. See Chester A. Bain, *Vietnam, The Roots of Conflict* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), p. 153; also George Carver "The Faceless Viet Cong," *Foreign Affairs*, 44 (April 1966), 347-472.
3. "Secret Letter Of The CPSU To Other Communist Parties Regarding The Split With The Chinese Communist Party," published by *Die Welt*, Hamburg, 21 March 1966, and quoted in "Text of Chinese Note to Russians and Excerpts from Soviet Letter to Parties," *The New York Times*, 24 March 1966, p. 14.
4. "Refutation of the New Leaders of the C.P.S.U. on 'United Action,'" *Peking Review*, 12 November 1965, pp. 10-21.
5. The four points were these: The US Government "must withdraw from South Vietnam US troops. . . . [It] must stop its acts of war against North Vietnam. . . . The internal affairs of South Vietnam must be settled by the South Vietnamese people themselves in accordance with the program of the NFLSV. . . . [And] the peaceful reunification of Vietnam is to be settled by the Vietnamese peoples in both zones, without any foreign interference" (Hanoi Radio broadcast, 13 April 1965).
6. Lin Piao, *Long Live The Victory of People's War* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1965).
7. Background briefing of George W. Ball on 1 April 1971 at the Stanford Faculty Club. Transcript of the lecture

deposited at the Institute of Political Studies, Stanford University.

8. See Eric Sevareid, "The Final Troubled Hours of Adlai Stevenson," *Look*, 30 November 1965, pp. 81-86.

9. The best documentary evidence of the "Marigold Affair" can be found in the so-called Diplomatic Volumes of "The Pentagon Papers" (*United States-Vietnam Relations 1945-1967*, Vol. 6.C.2), a copy of which is held in the US Army Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.

10. *Ibid.*, Vol. 6.C.3, p. 19. See transcript of Ambassador L. Thompson's conversation with Premier A. Kosygin.

11. Personal recollection.

12. Some of the details of the Paris peace negotiations were given to me during my interview with Ambassador Averell Harriman at his Yorktown Heights home in the summer of 1975.

13. Morton A. Kaplan et al., *Vietnam Settlement: Why*

1973, Not 1969? (Washington: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1973), p. 41.

14. Kissinger and his aides assumed that Hanoi believed the Hungarians and the Poles could be reliably counted upon to follow Soviet directions and that the Soviets would in turn do nothing to frustrate or embarrass North Vietnamese intentions. And, of course, this assumption proved to be entirely correct. This opinion was expressed to the author in a letter-interview dated 29 September 1977 by Ambassador William H. Sullivan, chief negotiator of the US Government at the 1973 Paris Peace Conference.

15. US Congress, House of Representatives, Committee on International Relations, Special Subcommittee on Investigations, *Hearing, The Vietnam-Cambodia Emergency, 1975: Part III—Vietnam Evacuation: Testimony of Ambassador Graham A. Martin*, 94th Cong., 2d Sess., 27 January 1976, p. 540.

