THE AMERICAN ROLE IN VIETNAM AND EAST ASIA

Between
Two Revolutions

HENRY J. KENNY

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With a foreword by
Ambassador Mike Mansfield

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Foreword

Philosophers throughout the ages have pointed out that there is nothing so constant in life as change. The dynamic events of twentieth-century East Asia illustrate this fact well. When I first set foot in Asia over half a century ago, nearly every country in the region was controlled by a colonial power. The appearance of regional stability, however, was deceiving, and the days of colonial rule were numbered. Proud people of ancient heritage could not for long remain subject to foreign domination, and movements for independence soon grew, aided, I might add, by Western ideas of freedom and modernization. Imperial Japanese expansion added to the turmoil, which ultimately drew the United States into World War II.

As the flames of war spread, it became apparent that the political landscape of Asia had changed forever. Japanese advances into Southeast Asia both undermined the authority of colonial regimes and provided a focal point against which resistance forces coalesced. By the time the war ended, the struggle for self-rule had become of paramount importance. In that struggle numerous nationalists turned to revolutionary movements as a vehicle to seize power. Many of these movements were directed not only against the reimposition of colonial rule, but against other rival groups as well.

During more recent years, the winds of change in East Asia have reversed direction, and are today more favorable than in any time in my experience. The dynamic nations of the region are improving the lives of their people in a manner unparalleled in recent history, and they generally appear to be managing the art of peaceful change across a broad spectrum of human endeavor. This trend is due largely to what Henry Kenny labels the second revolution in Asia today—that of free and independent nations developing better lives for themselves and their children, in cooperation with the industrial and post-industrial democracies. Their record is there for all to see—sustained economic growth, rising educational levels, progress in the arts and sciences, independent governments friendly to the United States, a gradually increasing respect for democratic processes, and growing commercial links across the Pacific Basin. Theirs is a revolution not of rising expectations and promises, but of rising social, political, and economic performance. It is a revolution far more attuned to the real needs of Asia today than the

violent revolutions of the past. It is, now and for the foreseeable future, of immense consequence to the United States.

I have made no secret of my conviction that the future of our nation is inextricably tied to the dynamic developments in Asia. For better or for worse, the United States is a Pacific nation. While the cultural pull of America has been eastward across the Atlantic, our vibrant push has always been and continues to be westward. The understanding and pursuit of American interests in Asia is thus crucial to the future of our nation. I am very pleased, therefore, that Mr. Kenny has undertaken the ambitious tasks of identifying many of the major changes which have and are taking place in this vast portion of the world, and interpreting their significance for American foreign policy. He has succeeded in both, and in so doing has made a major contribution to the understanding of East Asia and the American role therein. In my opinion, no area of the world is of more importance to the future of the United States than Asia. This book will certainly add to our appreciation of this dynamic region.

Ambassador Mike Mansfield
Tokyo, Japan

Preface

It was late afternoon when I received the order to move my infantry rifle company a distance of some 5 miles to a Vietnamese village which was coming under attack. Like so many towns and hamlets in the area that openly supported Saigon, many of which recently rallied to the government's side, the village had become the target of enemy attacks and reprisals. It was defended only by local militia. Earlier in the day, an American doctor and several medics had entered the village to administer aid and were now trapped therein. Our helicopter support had already been committed to similar engagements across the Dong Nai river, so we had to move as quickly as terrain and security would permit. Crossing alternating jungle and rice paddies characteristic of the area north of Saigon where the Delta yields to the jungle of War Zone D, I wondered whether we would reach the village on time. It was 1968 and the Tet Offensive was in full swing.

Just two years earlier I had built a Special Forces camp deeper in the D Zone, not 10 miles distant, so both the terrain and the village were quite familiar. It was ironic but perhaps not uncharacteristic of the war that the camp subsequently had been abandoned, leaving the village we were moving to assist vulnerable to attack. I had tried to understand the war for many years, and neither the attack nor our response to it were particularly surprising. In 1965 I had directed Vietnamese area studies for the Special Forces at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where we had emphasized that the political struggle for the "hearts and minds" of the people of Vietnam was being waged just as much by the bullet as by ideas. In declaring their support for Saigon, these villagers sought to exercise freedom of expression, but in so doing were risking their very lives.

It grew dark as we navigated the final stretch of jungle leading to the rice paddies surrounding the village. Rounding a bend in the final wooded area, there suddenly appeared in the darkness the appalling sight of a village entirely engulfed in flames. I halted the company to take a quick assessment of the situation, instructing my radio operator to switch to the frequency of the medical team in the village. As he did so a transmission came in loud and clear. I had studied the Vietnamese language for a full year in 1964, and immediately recognized the Hanoi dialect. A North Vietnamese headquarters was directing a subordinate unit to pull back and leave the village, stating that their trucks were ready to evacuate them from

the area. Here we were, not more than 40 miles from Saigon, and there were North Vietnamese troops preparing to board trucks after razing a village.

As we prepared to move on the village itself, several bursts of automatic weapons fire rang out in the night. I felt a sudden bee-sting sensation in both my legs. I was hit and, for a split second, felt the tranquility of approaching death. A brief exchange of fire ensued, and then there was silence. A medic administered morphine and tried to slow the rapid loss of blood. Unable to move and rapidly losing consciousness, I told my second platoon leader, a dynamic black lieutenant with outstanding leadership attributes, to take charge of the company. Some time later I was hoisted aboard a rescue helicopter for evacuation to a field hospital. Now an amputee and, I felt, a cripple for life, I left Vietnam, a land and people I had grown to love, thinking never to return.

Two years later, thanks to some great doctors, nurses, medics, and fellow patients, as well as several remarkable professors at American University, I was able to walk into classrooms at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point and teach courses in international relations and problems of developing nations. I discussed many of those problems with firsthand illustrations from Vietnam, which I felt doubly obligated to cite as many of those cadets, even though the war was winding down, were to serve and some to die in that beleaguered country. It was also my experience during those years to bear the sad news to next-of-kin in nearby areas of New York State, a grim reminder of the price of war. Finally, during the summer of 1972, I joined many fellow officers in trying to make intelligent recommendations to the Secretary of Defense in response to the massive North Vietnamese offensive in South Vietnam.

With the war's end my interests shifted elsewhere. I had devoted most of my career to Vietnam since graduating from West Point in 1961 and was preparing for a new life as a civilian. Then, in the spring of 1975, the North overran the South. All my personal efforts, not to mention the far greater sacrifice of so many others, seemed to have been in vain. In an emotional reaction I forthwith threw out all my Vietnamese language books.

As irony would have it, that action was regrettable indeed, for just a few months later I was once again en route to Indochina, this time as Deputy Staff Director of the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia. I stopped in Paris to gain the advice of the former French High Commissioner in Hanoi, Jean Sainteney, and then proceeded to Laos and Vietnam. In Hanoi with Congressmen Montgomery, Gilman, Ottinger, and McCloskey, we initiated the long and difficult postwar process of receiving information on and the remains of American servicemen still unaccounted for in

Indochina. In 1977 I returned to Vientiane and Hanoi, this time with a Presidential Commission on the same subject. In both visits it was my strong recommendation, based in part on conversations with Sainteney, to separate the political and humanitarian issues, as the former could take many years to resolve. Unfortunately, the realities of international politics, including Vietnamese links between war reparations and missing in action (MIA) information, as well as the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia, impeded as full an accounting as might otherwise have been possible.

For the remainder of the 1970s and the first two years of the present decade I had the good fortune to serve as the special assistant to Ambassador Mike Mansfield in Tokyo. A great American doing a great job representing the United States, Ambassador Mansfield did everything in his power to direct Washington's attention to the important changes taking place in Japan and the rest of East Asia. After cautioning against American overinvolvement for so many years during the Vietnam era, Mansfield now cautioned against American underinvolvement in the face of our post-Vietnam retrenchment in Asia. His vision of Asia and America's role therein greatly influenced my own perceptions. Having helped contend with the dynamism of revolutionary communism in a nationalist setting in Vietnam, I now supported U.S. interests in light of an even greater revolution sweeping most of the rest of Asia—that of an entire people building a better life for themselves and their children through the skill and determination which only freedom can bring. It is the American response to these two contrasting forces, revolutionary communism in an Asian context and the revolutionary progress in Japan and the other free countries of the region, about which this book is written.

Acknowledgments

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Any errors or omissions are, of course, my own responsibility; the views expressed are personal ones and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States government or any agency thereof.

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PART I:
THE HISTORICAL RECORD

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Vietnam and East Asia: Two Centuries of Escalating American Involvement

The magnification of the importance of Vietnam in American foreign policy was symbolically represented by the huge maps of South Vietnam that came to dominate so many governmental offices and corridors of power during the war. It was also seen in the thousands of publications about Vietnam and Southeast Asia written after the war began—in stark contrast to the handful of books available in English prior to the war, when most Americans could not even locate Vietnam on a map. The significance of the country in American perspective came not so much from events taking place in Vietnam as from its relationship to the rest of Asia, where the United States did and still has long-standing national interests. A brief overview of the background and development of those interests and the perceived challenges to them will help put Vietnam in the perspective of the larger U.S. role in Asia, then and now.

American involvement in the affairs of Asia dates to the earliest days of the republic. When George Washington was inaugurated as President of the United States, there were 13 American clipper ships in the harbor at Canton. In the century that followed, American commercial interests developed slowly but steadily, even though a tremendous share of national energy was channeled into opening the West. During the nineteenth century, missionary activity in China and Southeast Asia developed, and by mid-century America's Asiatic fleet began making periodic port visits throughout the region. It was as part of this activity that Admiral Perry and his famous "black ships" opened the previously insulated Japan to Western trade and influence. The movement west across the Great Plains and the Rockies to the Pacific generated additional pressures for a U.S. presence in the Western Pacific, and soon Yankee traders and

investors were importing silk and coolie labor and exporting machinery and textiles.

In 1898 the United States surprised itself and the world by its occupation of the Philippine Islands as a result of the war with Spain. The writer Finley Dunne caught the flavor of popular reaction to this event in the following satire:

> "I know what I'd do if I was Mack," said Mr. Hennesey. "I'd hist a flag over the Ph'lippeenes, an I'd take in the whole lot iv thim."
>
> "An' yet," said Mr. Dooley, "tis not more thin two months since ye larned whether they were islands or canned goods. . . . Suppose ye was standin' at th' corner iv State an' Archery Road, wud ye know what car to take to get to th' Ph'lippeens? If yer son Packy was to ask ye where th' Ph'lippeens is, cud ye give him any good idea whether they was in Rooshia or jus' west iv the thracks? . . ."
>
> "Mebbe I couldn't," said Mr. Hennesey, haughtily, "but I'm f'r takin thim in anyhow. . . ."[1]

Manifest Destiny was alive and well as the westward push continued. Also in 1898 the United States declared an open door policy, designed to maintain growing commercial and cultural links with China by guaranteeing both its territorial integrity and continued American access to that territory amidst the competing claims of the colonial powers. By the time the twentieth century began the main outlines of U.S. policy in Asia had already been established. These were:

1. prevention of hegemony by a single nation or alliance,
2. access to the natural resources and markets of Asia, and
3. the maintenance or development of conditions favoring the transmittal of political and religious ideas.

The history of U.S. participation in Far Eastern affairs during this century is largely the history of efforts to secure these national interests with very limited available means.

The first threat to them emanated from the land Perry had opened to the West less than 50 years before. Japan had defeated Chinese forces in 1894-95 and had taken Formosa (Taiwan), Korea, and the southern tip of Manchuria as the fruits of victory. By the turn of the century she was casting covetous eyes on the rest of China, in emulation of the colonial powers. Then in 1905 the Imperial Navy startled the world with a smashing defeat of the Russian Far Eastern Fleet in the Tsushima Strait off Japan. Subsequently

Japan achieved an understanding with the United States whereby she would be allowed some westward expansion in return for a promise not to threaten American interests in the Philippines. At the same time the United States sought to contain the degree of Japanese expansion through a multipolar balance of power including the European powers. With the advent of World War I, however, the European nations became too embroiled in the struggle for their own survival to pursue secondary interests in Asia. In 1915 Japan presented China its infamous "21 demands" for further economic and political concessions. By the war's end Japan had become the paramount naval power in the Western Pacific and was to remain so until the Battle of Midway in 1942.

During the interwar years, the United States sought to reestablish a balance of power in Asia in order to prevent total control by Japanese Imperial forces. In 1922, for example, the Washington Conference on Disarmament established a capital ship construction ratio of 5:5:3 for the United States, Britain, and Japan respectively. Yet the seeming margin of security offered by this arrangement was illusory. Both British and American navies had higher priority commitments elsewhere and, as is still true today, it was impossible logistically and operationally to sustain much more than one-third of our Pacific fleet thousands of miles from U.S. rear area support bases. Moreover, American potential to influence events became severely limited by pacifist domestic sentiment, which constrained the military budget, and by fears of overextending existing military forces in the face of the rising power of Nazi Germany.

Until World War II it was clear that American interests in Asia were becoming increasingly important, but it was unclear whether the United States could or would support those interests at the risk of war if necessary. Then in 1941, Japan, having already absorbed much of China and northern Vietnam, struck into southern Vietnam in an apparent effort to establish a base for further drives into Malaya and the rest of Southeast Asia. As part of that plan, presaging later American and then Soviet moves, the Japanese built an airfield at Cam Ranh Bay. Despite numerous restraints on the potential use of American power in Asia, this action by Japanese leaders to expand and dominate their Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere was perceived by American leaders as an unacceptable accretion of power over the people and resources of East Asia. The United States sought to contain this expansion, for it threatened not only choice allied colonies such as the Dutch East Indies, French Indochina, and British Burma and Malaya, but also the American position in the Philippines and vital shipping lanes to and from all these areas. President Franklin Roosevelt therefore reacted to the Japanese move by imposing an oil embargo on Japan, and declaring

American determination to prevent further Japanese expansion into Southeast Asia. It was this action, more than any other, that convinced Japanese military leaders of the need to strike Pearl Harbor. Thus it was that U.S. policy in Asia had merely applied a "nonrecognition" doctrine and issued protests concerning Japanese takeovers in Manchuria and China, but called for stern warnings and economic retaliation with the risk of war in response to Japanese movement into Vietnam.

The war in the Pacific brought home to Americans the strategic fact that the security of our nation is firmly tied to a balance of power in Asia, and that no nation can realistically aspire to hegemony in the region without threatening American security. The technological advances of the twentieth century showed the Pacific to be a highway rather than a barrier. Pearl Harbor vividly demonstrated that American interest in Asia, as well as the nation's security, could not be assured by a retreat to fortress America. Only active involvement, including a military force structure deployed beyond the West Coast, was seen as assuring those interests. It was in this vein that both Secretary of State Dean Acheson and General Douglas MacArthur defined a postwar U.S. defensive perimeter running from the Philippines through the Ryukyus and Japan to the Aleutians and Alaska.

In the aftermath of World War II, however, it was to take more than military power to assure American interests, for the situation in Asia had been profoundly changed by the war. First, the disruption of colonial empires and spheres of influence wrought by Japanese advances into China and Southeast Asia accelerated the mobilization of nationalist forces throughout the region. Mao Zedong had called for a people's war for the purpose of land redistribution and other agrarian reform, but the key factor in his ability to mobilize the masses was nationalism. He rallied the peasantry with calls for the end of Japanese rule, and when that rule began to weaken in the mid-1940s he was in an excellent position to inherit the Mandate of Heaven as he united China under communist rule. Southeast Asian nations faced a basically similar situation. The occidental colonial powers had been discredited by their early defeat at the hands of Oriental Japan, and when the Japanese were themselves defeated and finally withdrew in 1945, the nationalists were determined to achieve full independence at the earliest possible date.

A second effect of the war militating against a return to the old order was starvation. Prior to the war most Asians were already living at a bare subsistence level. The war itself wrought untold devastation upon the land, the lives, and the transportation network of the region. Food and material had been expropriated, and carts, trucks, and boats that could have been used to transport the necessi-