

VIETNAM NEWSLETTER

Number 8

Published by Graduate Students
of Stanford University

July 28, 1965

Why I Will Not Go to the United States

The NATION April 19, 1965

Jean-Paul Sartre

On learning that Jean-Paul Sartre had cancelled his lectures at Cornell University, The Nation cabled him for an explanation of his action. In response, M. Sartre authorized us to publish in America the following statement (with interview interpolations) which he had already prepared for Le Nouvel Observateur. The English translation is by Lionel Abel.

Paris

Let's not kid ourselves. We are in danger of being caught in one of the prettiest snares ever invented by propagandists. What do the Americans say? That they are intensifying the war in Vietnam; that they are bombing the north and using gas in the south, in order to be in a better position to negotiate. Considering the horror, this sounds encouraging. But what do the Americans claim amount to? Obviously, one always makes war in order to make peace. In order to arrive at some kind of peace. The kind of peace one desires. In order to arrive at some kind of negotiation. The kind one wants to impose. Here is the problem: Is a solution being sought which can be accepted by the enemy, or is the enemy's destruction being sought, so that his successors will accept capitulation? Washington declares that it is waiting for some sign of good will on the part of North Vietnam. Translated, this means: We are waiting for North Vietnam to concede defeat, to beg us to stop bombarding it and to promise to give no further aid to the Vietcong. Clearly this means the Americans are for extending the war. So let's understand them. That is of first importance. And having understood them, we must take a stand ourselves. That is just what I have done.

To be sure, there are Americans who have understood and condemned this policy, and who have even demonstrated against it. It is these Americans who reproach me for having called off the series of lectures I was to give next month in the United States. I had been invited a year ago by Cornell University, where I count not a few friends. I have in mind those on

the Cornell staff who recently sent President Johnson an open letter, denouncing his policy on Vietnam, and who organized a protest march in Ithaca. I had accepted Cornell's invitation, first of all, because of the quality of this university, and then because I had noted the development in the United States of an active minority, whose views I sympathized with, which has been participating side by side with Negroes in the struggle against racial discrimination. At Cornell I would not have felt out of place.

It is true that at the time America was already at war with Vietnam. But the war had not yet reached the proportions it took on just a month ago. When the United States, after the defeat of the French in 1954, decided to support the Diem government, its purpose evidently was to insure its own strategic position in the Far East. But one could think that at that particular moment it had been caught in a trap; one was not obliged to think that it wanted to support a dictatorship. Since then the trap has slowly closed. The situation has become worse, year after year, and the Americans have found themselves squeezed. One would even have been able to sympathize with them if they had tried to get out of the trap by seeking a solution which a democratically elected South Vietnamese government could have found acceptable.

Instead of which, when it became evident that the successive shocks to this dictatorship were due entirely to personal rivalries within a decadent ruling clique, and when it became clear, too, that the regime was detested by the people of Vietnam as a whole, the Americans refused to draw reasonable conclusions and turned to what I would call an attitude of "diversion": Held in check by the Vietcong in the south, they decided to strike out against the neighbor in the north.

Militarily, this made no sense, for these actions do not help them toward victory in the south. The American high command itself has estimated that only 10 to 20 per

cent of the arms and munitions of the Vietcong come from North Vietnam. Let's suppose that an impenetrable wall could be set up, separating the north from the south. Would the fighting strength of the Vietcong be diminished? Hardly. The Vietcong would merely change its tactics and intensify its efforts to arm itself from the same source that has already served it, namely, the depots of the South Vietnamese army.

Aggression against the north is the expression of an ignominious policy, one which has modified the very character of the war.

It is a quantitative difference. Operations are addressed to other targets and are carried out by other means, but the objectives remain the same.

On the contrary. After a certain point, as everybody knows, quantity changes into quality. The bombardments of the north have given the war the Americans are waging there a new aspect. These bombings indicate an irreversible qualitative leap, insofar as they make brutally evident that American society as such has an imperialist base.

Until the bombings, the situation in Vietnam had a politically and morally positive aspect, insofar as the Vietcong was moving toward victory, while the American position was becoming more and more untenable. It would have been possible for me to go to the United States at that time, because I had the definite impression that a period of imperialist recession had begun and that the Americans were about ready to judge their policy absurd.

The bombings have changed all this. After they began, I realized that the Americans had understood nothing and that there was no common language between them and us. They tell me: Come and argue with us. But discussion is possible only with those who are ready to put in question the whole American imperialist policy—not only in Vietnam but in South America, in Korea.

(continued next page)

and in all the countries constituting a "third world"; moreover, discussion is possible only with those Americans who will concede that American policy cannot be changed short of a complete turnover of American society. Now very few, even on the American Left, are ready to go that far. Today, it is impossible for a European intellectual who aligns himself with the "third world" to ask the State Department for a visa to the United States. Should he go there, whatever he says, the people of the "third world" will condemn him. Because why should one pay a visit to an enemy? The reaction of my Cuban friends is significant in this respect. Several months ago they said to me: "Go to the United States, certainly, but speak about Cuba when you get there." Since the bombings of North Vietnam, they have all asked: "What are you going there for?"

It wasn't the State Department that invited you, but precisely those intellectuals who formed part of that active minority of which you spoke a while ago. What you might have said there would have been published in the press and have had some effect.

To whom would I have spoken? I would have given five lectures in the university to an audience of students and teachers. There would have been no real dialogue, since on the whole my audience would have been more or less in agreement with me. To be sure, some right wingers would have been charming and would have said (you know the American feeling for fair play): "He has the right, of course, to state his opinions." Some newspapers would have published extracts from my lectures—ten lines here, twenty lines there—and that would have been all. This would have produced hardly a ripple on the surface of American life. And on the other hand, it could be said that Sartre, the "Nobel Prize winner" (in quotation marks, of course), came to the United States to discuss reasonably, with fair-minded people, the American

policy in Vietnam. That is what I did not want.

I propose a comparison. Suppose that Faulkner, winner of the Nobel Prize (this time without quotation marks), had been invited to give lectures in certain French universities at the height of the Algerian war—in 1957, for example. And suppose that he had come here at the time of Sakiet. I ask you: What importance could his words have had? Some newspapers would have published passages of what he said, perhaps attenuated, and most people in the inflamed France of that time would have thought: "Why is this foreigner mixing in? Since he accepts our invitation to come here, by what right does he condemn our policies? And anyway, the Americans have no lessons to teach us, with their hidden colonies, like Puerto Rico. . . ." You may be sure that people would have reacted in this way. Any protest by Faulkner would have been undermined in advance. Why? Because, in coming to visit us, he would have been accepting a whole system of which French policy in Algeria was an integral part.

All the same, isn't it true that the Americans are precisely the ones whom it is desirable to convince about Vietnam? And the young American Left, which has practically no outlet in the press, would have been able to borrow your voice while you were there.

The problem is not whether or not I would have helped such Americans more or less by going there. The fact is that I cannot help them at all. Because their political weight, unhappily, is nil. It is not the Left that will impose negotiations, any more than the French Left, which was much stronger, was able by its pressures to force negotiations in Algeria. The game was played by three parties: de Gaulle, the Army and the FLN, supported by the Algerian population of the cities. For our part, we often demonstrated in the streets. This was right for us to do, because we were French. And

it served to show the Algerians that there was, after all, a French minority which considered the war evil. But we recognized that we did not achieve any real results; objectively, our opposition accomplished nothing.

In the United States, too, there is an opposition. It is more and more active. And in a way what it has done in the struggle against racism has required more force and courage than was required of the French in the struggle against the Algerian war, even when Frenchmen directly aided the FLN. To go to the Southern states to participate in a march with Negroes means to run the risk of being killed. Two Northern white students were killed last year in Mississippi. Not long ago a minister was killed in Alabama and after that a young married woman. Nevertheless, more and more whites are ready to run these risks. They show an admirable and astonishing courage.

Their action is certainly not useless, insofar as it forces Americans to take account of the racist oppression existing in their own country. Hundreds of Negroes have been killed in the South. That did not cause much stir. But when a young white woman, when a white minister was assassinated, it was something else again. You will remember how people were touched in France by the testimony of Henri Alleg; that was because he was the first Frenchman who we knew for sure had been subjected to torture. People had come to admit that Moslems were being tortured, but for a Frenchman to be tortured was quite another matter.

In their struggle the American antiracists have the support—at least in words—of their government. One sees here a curious kind of balance, often found in the United States. When the government hardens its imperialist policy abroad, it often takes a more liberal line domestically on racial matters. Today the mobilization of public opinion in the antiracist struggle, encouraged as it is by the govern-

When Students at Cornell Asked Harriman What We'd Do If Communists Were Elected

QUESTION: What if the people of the Dominican Republic elect, freely, a communist government?

Mr. Averell HARRIMAN: Well, that's a, that situation has never been faced. There is no indication that a Communist government has the popularity—

AUDIENCE: What about Guatemala?

Mr. HARRIMAN: It has never, no government has ever come into—no Communist government has ever come into power by popular election.

AUDIENCE: Try it in Vietnam.

Mr. HARRIMAN: Now, if you're Communists, you can go to some other country. . . .

AUDIENCE: We're not Communists.—Would you call that democracy?—Answer the question, answer the question.

Mr. HARRIMAN: I don't know, I don't know. Nobody

knows what will happen if there is a Communist government elected. It is very unlikely.

AUDIENCE: When are you going to stop this horrible lying and name-calling.

Mr. HARRIMAN: One of the principles of the inter-American system is that Communism is incompatible with the American system. Now that is stated by twenty different countries, and—

AUDIENCE: Nine are dictatorships.

Mr. HARRIMAN: Why are these bleeding hearts for Communists? How many Communists are there among you? Will those who are Communists please stand up?

AUDIENCE: Don't try to slander us with 'communism'. McCarthyist slanders. They won't work here.

—Averell Harriman At Cornell, a transcript, May 11 (abr.)

ment, serves Johnson by turning the attention of the people from what he is doing in Vietnam.

That is why those Americans who have taken a clear position against the American policy in Vietnam are much fewer than those who are participating in the anti-racist struggle. They form a tiny minority of intellectuals who, if not fully conscious politically, are at least morally aware of the absurd and ignominious policy their country is carrying out in Vietnam. These people are totally impotent. One of them wrote me: "If you do not come to us, if you break off all communication with us, it must be that you regard us as the accursed of this earth!" I do think, in fact, that a man of the American Left who has a clear view of the situation, and who sees himself isolated in a land entirely conditioned by the myths of imperialism and anticommunism, such a man, I say, and with all respect, is indeed one of the accursed of this earth. He totally disapproves of the politics carried on in his name and his action is totally ineffective—in any case, for the present.

Should there be one day a transformation of American policy, this would have to come, would it not, from within that country?

That depends. With respect to race, certainly. The pressure already exerted has definitely produced results. It is the work of the Negroes, to be sure, but also of the whites beginning to struggle alongside them. And public opinion has become more and more sensitive about this problem. It will take perhaps twenty or thirty years for the racial situation to be normalized somewhat in the United States. But the movement will not stop, because the Negroes will never permit their experience to be forgotten.

We cannot give any help to the American antiracists. For someone to come from abroad, and declare that "racism is very bad," would

help absolutely no one. American society has produced its myths and its ideology, and it is on the basis of these myths and this ideology—and against them—that a new American thought will have to form itself. Nothing like this can come from Europe.

Vietnam is another problem. First of all, there are only about three months in which to take action. But it is unthinkable at the present moment for the forces of the American Left to modify a policy which is governed by the deepest structure of American society. American opinion can become sensitive on this subject only as a result of a deep crisis: a military disaster or the threat of world war. The only way we have of contributing to this awareness is by making a brutal and global condemnation of American policy in Vietnam and by trying to provoke wherever possible—that is to say, in Europe—protests against that policy.

Certain journals have said that you condemn the Americans more readily than the Soviets.

If we look at the facts, that is a plain lie. With Merleau-Ponty I condemned, in my own review, *Les Temps Modernes*, the Stalinist concentration camps the moment their existence was demonstrated. I violently condemned Soviet intervention in Budapest in an interview for *L'Express*, the essentials of which were republished in most of the press.

In any case, this accusation is absurd. We are not preachers and it is not our duty to divide accusations and strictures equally, or to make the same number of moral sermons to the East as to the West. One must know what side one is on, without losing sight of the fact that critical judgment is an intellectual duty.

If the American Government, recognizing the error of prior administrations, had withdrawn its military experts and soldiers from Vietnam, I would not have been

the last to approve, and to think that some change had occurred in the United States. But the contrary has happened: The economic and social structures of the United States have made the worst, if not certain, at least the most likely to occur. In fact, the worst has occurred. The American intervention in North Vietnam has to be understood in the context of the whole foreign policy of the United States.

It is not only Vietnam that is at stake. If the Americans were pushed back to Saigon, there would certainly be repercussions throughout the "third world," and this would certainly imply trouble in Latin America. The policy is indeed to maintain by force the whole system of oppression.

I have visited the United States in the past. I had friends there. But conditions were different then. America was emerging from the war, and even if I did not approve all I saw, it was not the same as now. Today it is a question of a clear act of aggression, cynically and characteristically embarked on without justification or even a serious alibi. I wish to say, also, that we do not now have to regard America as the center of the world. It is the greatest power in the world? Granted. But note: It is far from being the center of it. When one is a European, one has the duty even not to consider America as the world's center; one has to show one's interest in and prove one's solidarity with the people of Vietnam, Cuba and Africa, with all one's friends in the "third world," who have thrust themselves to the threshold of existence and of freedom, and who prove each day that the greatest power in the world is incapable of imposing its laws; that it is also the most vulnerable power in the world, and that the world has not chosen it to be its center of gravity. The United States will evolve, of course, slowly, very slowly. And more, I think, if one resists it, than if one preaches to it.

This Retired Texas Marine Corps General Seems to Be Offering LBJ Some Good Advice

"The current operations in Vietnam and the Dominican Republic recall previous Marine experience in the field of guerrilla warfare. . . . Cumulative experience in 'banana wars' reached its peak in the five-year struggle against Sandino in Nicaragua—a region strikingly similar to Vietnam. . . . After some preliminary skirmishing in the spring of 1926 between the Conservative forces, the Nicaraguan civil war erupted on a country-wide scale during August. "In accordance with the then well-established formula, the U.S. intervened. Marines . . . landed to enforce a neutral zone . . . ostensibly for the protection of American lives and property. . . . After voluble but futile protest against the 'un-neutral' action of U.S. forces, Gen. Moncado marched westward toward the coffee fincas. . . .

"The U. S. Government, defending its action as a necessary part of the Monroe Doctrine, was faced with considerable political opposition at home and abroad. Strictly mili-

tary considerations were secondary to political expediency—a situation which appears to prevail in Vietnam . . . the brigade deployed to outlying districts for the task of policing the country prior to the 1928 elections. . . .

"The result of what was likely the first honest election in the history of the republic was a sweeping Liberal victory, in which General Moncado [against whom we had intervened] was elected President. . . . The U.S. government might have preferred a different outcome, but in the event made no effort to interfere. . . . This strictly neutral attitude helped to reconcile the Nicaraguan citizenry to the Marine occupation, and facilitated subsequent military operations. There appears to be a lesson to guide possible future intervention in the domestic politics of occupied countries. If we must intervene, favor the side of the electoral majority."

—Gen. Megee (U.S. Marines, ret.) of Austin Texas, writing in the June, 1965 issue of the Marine Corps Gazette.

Why the Communists won't talk

MANCHESTER GUARDIAN WEEKLY

Thursday June 24 1965

Authoritative voices both in Peking and Hanoi have been raised against the Commonwealth mission on Vietnam, and it does not look as though the mission will be able to visit those capitals. Well, the effort was worth making, and is still worth persevering with. Perhaps Mr Wilson can be accused of mishandling the matter—above all of making the announcement too precipitately; perhaps, too, as some African members of the Commonwealth conference argue, he is too deeply committed to the United States line to be an acceptable leader of the mission. But it is doubtful whether even after the most streamlined launching this ship would have reached the Communist ports of call; in April an appeal by 17 nonaligned Governments was likewise (although not so rudely) rejected, and developments in Vietnam since then need not have convinced President Ho Chi Minh or Mr Chou En-lai that they should change their mind. No one has yet mentioned consulting the Vietcong, but on the Commonwealth mission at any rate their views probably coincide with those of their allies in the north.

For the Communists are now claiming the right of victors to choose their own time of negotiating. So long as it thought victory to be possible (that is, until about 11 weeks ago) the US Government claimed this right, too. Now it has deferred such hopes until the end of the monsoon, when things will be better—just as they were going to be better when President Ngo Dinh Diem went, or when the Americans "changed the rules" by striking north. The history of the war is a series of these hopes disappointed; and any discussion on how to end it must surely start from the fact (is it not a fact?) that after trying almost everything they still have no idea how to win it.

How can this be, when they have all the aircraft and all the heavy armament? The experience of the past five months shows that these simply are not the appropriate weapons—that the more ponderously they are brought to bear the worse the battle goes. Last week we saw the penultimate absurdity of 30 strategic bombers—B-52s—flying 4,000 miles there and back to plaster with thousands of pounds of bombs a tiny forest area of a few square miles; and apparently killing no Vietcong. Meanwhile, as US forces get more involved in the fighting, the political situation in Saigon—from the Americans' point of view—goes from bad to worse: a case of cause and effect. They are now saddled with Air Vice-Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky as Head of Government. He is a man under whom anything might happen.

So even if supporters of the present US policy are right in believing the war to be just another case of "Communist aggression," which "must not be allowed to succeed," we are entitled to ask them how they propose to stop it. And if they say: by a still greater military effort, then we are entitled to point to the achievements of the effort so far, and demand to know at what moment it will begin to become effective instead of

counter-effective. At present that very effort is helping and not checking the spread of Communist influence, and will go on doing so for as long as the war is being fought unsuccessfully. Mr Chou En-lai knows that very well (although he might put it in other terms). No wonder he is not anxious to meet people urging negotiations. Last week's raid, he must think gratefully, succeeded in making even B-52s look like paper tigers.

Similarly with the domino theory. If it were true that Vietcong success would cause non-Communist regimes all over South-east Asia to topple that would still not show how the war is to be won. In fact the theory is helping to lose it. It leads once again to an "if only" state of mind: if only foreign subversion could be stopped all would be safe, and, conversely, attempts at change must be regarded suspiciously as being due to foreign subversion. For that reason the United States twice removed Prince Souvanna Phouma from the premiership of Laos, with unhappy results. There are indeed revolutionary movements in Siam, and no doubt they look to China for support and are led by Communists. But a country ruled by the sort of men who ruled Siam until recently (with American support) and who neglected the needs of a large part of their populations, must expect revolutionary movements. Bad Governments have been overthrown (often by worse) since the beginning of history. The way to prevent a revolution in Siam, as the Government there is beginning to realise, is by improving conditions. Without this not even an American victory in Vietnam could save the present regime.

It is through trying to make the Vietnamese people fit into these theoretical patterns, instead of taking its guidance from what really moves them, that the US Government has got into its difficulties. To get out it will have to rely on their help. What moves the people of the South is above all, no doubt, a yearning for the end of the war. What moves those in the North is the ambition to reunify their country. It is a legitimate ambition (recognised in the Geneva agreements), and reunification will indeed most likely be the outcome of the war.

The reunified Government will probably be dominated by Communists, but whether they will be vassals of the Chinese will depend largely on how they achieve their power. President Ho Chi Minh would almost certainly prefer to rely on the distant Russians, and so would many of the younger leaders. They were able to do so until a few years ago. It will be harder for them the longer the war continues; the Americans are moving towards yet another "too late." In default of any plan to win the war they would do best for themselves to encourage the Vietnamese—from Saigon, from Hanoi, and from the Vietcong—to end it between themselves as quickly as possible. It will probably come to that anyway—but too late again?

The One Target Our Bombers Never Miss Seems to Be The Heart of the Vietnamese People

"How long will it take some people to realize that bombing Hanoi or Peking will have little or no effect on the guerrilla forces fighting a thousand miles away in the jungles around Saigon. . . . Their strength is that they are a part of the people and the terrain in which they fight. . . . To bomb them is to bomb the women and children, the villagers and the peasants with whom they are intermingled. Our bombing attacks turn the people against us and feed the fires of rebellion."

—McGovern (D. South Dakota) in the Senate June 17.

Saigon—As ever more and more jet fighters, this week's B-52 bombers and even U.S. combat troops unfamiliar with Vietnamese conditions are thrown in, the indiscriminate force unleashed is likely to inflict heavy destruction on the local peasantry on whose allegiance winning the war still depends. . . . A dangerous backfiring effect was also in evidence at recently attacked Songbe, when a Vietnamese survey staff sent by the U.S. Embassy attempted to learn the public reaction and found that 170 out of 310 people approached refused even to talk with them.

—Richard Critchfield in the Washington Star June 22.

Summer Editor:

David Ransom

Faculty Advisors:

Karel de Leeuw
Chas. Dreksmaier
Charles Stein

Send contributions:

Stanford Vietnam
Newsletter
Box 4525,
Stanford, Cal.