THE XMAS-NEW YEAR PERIOD of 1966-67 will certainly hold a special place in the political history of the Vietnam war, when that history comes to be written. For this was the moment when, largely through the reports of an American journalist, the demand for an unconditional end to the bombing of North Vietnam took on life and color for millions of people throughout the capitalist world.

With the despatches from Hanoi of Harrison E. Salisbury, an assistant managing editor of the New York Times, and their exposure of the real consequences of the bombing, this demand has sorted itself out from all other demands as the cardinal immediate step to be taken if the conflict is to be brought to an end. The ending of the bombing of North Vietnam will not in itself bring peace. But continuation of the bombing guarantees the prolongation and intensification of the conflict.

The dramatic strengthening of the demand for this first step in "de-escalation" in Vietnam has come almost exactly two years after the beginning of escalation—the latest, most feverish and most murderous phase of US Vietnam policy. Escalation—the involvement of massive numbers of US troops in direct combat in South Vietnam and, from February 7, 1965, the continuous bombing of the territory of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the north—was itself the child of failure.

It is all too easily forgotten (largely because it reflects the inglorious evolution of the American position) that the pre-escalation US stand, adhered to for a decade, was that US military men were to take no part in the fighting but were simply concerned to "advise" the armed forces of the South Vietnamese client regime. In December, 1964, on the eve of escalation, there were
just 23,000 such advisers in South Vietnam. But the developments of the early weeks of 1965 were such that the US could no longer afford the luxury of this measure of detachment. Escalation had the plain purpose of preventing the politico-military collapse of the Saigon regime, and an end to the war, which were imminent at that time.

All the varied justifications advanced for the bombing of North Vietnam cannot hide the essential fact that in its origin it was primarily designed to salvage the morale of the Saigon regime. (The statement of that youthful ghoulish, Air Vice-Marshall Ky, that the day the US began to bomb the north was “the happiest day in my life” accurately expresses this political truth.)

The bombing of North Vietnam continues to be primarily a function of US policy in the south. It is not, and never has been, primarily designed to prevent the passage of men and supplies from the north since these have never been anything but secondary elements in the war in the south.

Some figures give a notion of the magnitude of the assault by the world’s most powerful imperialism in the period of escalation on a poor and economically backward nation of 30 million souls. The total of US armed forces in South Vietnam—army, marines, air force and navy—has now (January 1967) reached 460,000, nearing the peak figure of the Korea war. The US magazine Newsweek wrote (December 5):

Additional troops are currently flowing into the country at the rate of 15,000 to 17,000 a month and there is no sign yet of an early slackening in that rate. Indeed, as of now the only limitations on the size of the US build-up in Vietnam would appear to be domestic political considerations and the question of how many GI’s the Vietnamese economy can tolerate without collapsing.

As for the air war, the present daily average of missions against the north is 130 to 150, each with one to five aircraft. Nazi Germany reached a monthly record of 12,000 individual aircraft sorties against Britain during the Second World War. The Americans are flying more than 24,000 a month over both North and South Vietnam.

Concerning the effectiveness of this monstrous pattern of aggression, a well-informed supporter of the US, Denis Warner, has written (Melbourne Herald, December 23): “... there is nothing about the situation to suggest that victory is appreciably closer than it was five years, or even one year, ago.”

Whence comes the strength that is effectively combating this titanic onslaught? The Vietnamese power to resist is without a doubt the most glorious political phenomenon in the present-day world. Bertrand Russell’s tribute to the people of Vietnam could be echoed by friends of peace and freedom everywhere.
Russell said, at the November 16 press conference in London which launched his proposed Vietnam War Crimes Tribunal:

I can recall many wars. I cannot recall a people so tormented, yet so devoid of the failings of their tormentors... I have no memory of any people so enduring, or of any nation with a spirit of resistance so unquenchable.

Whether the Vietnamese power to resist is demonstrated in the unabated military struggle of the National Liberation Front in the south, or in the no less courageous and superbly ingenious fight against the air war in the north, it springs from a popular moral and political unity, and an attachment to independence, without peer in the modern world. It was this unity and attachment to independence which brought the Saigon regime to the threshold of collapse in the beginning of 1965. It is also the guarantee of the success of the Vietnamese cause.

A high official of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam once pointed out to me the remarkably homogeneous character of his people's history. The Vietnamese identity was historically formed in resistance to the aggression of feudal China. The modern Vietnamese nation was formed in the process of resisting French aggression. The national entity of Vietnam, which for historical reasons has been more strongly formed in the north than in the south, is coming fully into being in resistance to the aggression of the US in South Vietnam today.

The goal of Vietnamese struggle is national independence, the right to develop Vietnamese society unfettered by foreign interference. Seeking independence, the Vietnamese act with independence in the process of their struggle. The hoary slander of "Peking domination" of Vietnamese policy (Sir Robert Menzies' "downward thrust of Chinese communism") has taken a severe beating in recent times, as the Chinese leaders have become ever more deeply embroiled in their "cultural revolution" in-fighting, and Hanoi has unfolded a series of brilliant diplomatic initiatives to do with the war, of which the decision to admit Harrison Salisbury is only one. The care taken by the Vietnamese leaders to foster good relations with the Soviet Union is perhaps the most striking proof of their firm independence of the present Chinese leading group, with its obsessive anti-Sovietism.

It should also be said that within this independence there is also, as it were, another: the independence of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam vis-a-vis the government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The charge of "tool of Hanoi" against the Front ought to be seen to be false from the heroic quality of the fighting men of the NLF: no force on earth could make men fight in that way in order to implement the will of an outside interest.
But above all the charge cannot stand up to historical examination: the course of their country’s history has meant that regionalism as between northerners and southerners is a quite significant element in Vietnamese politics—northerners simply could not succeed in organising a movement in the south that ran counter to the will of a significant section of southerners. The difference in flags and programs between the socialist government in North Vietnam and the national-democratic NLF are no mere device: they express the differing stages of revolutionary development in the two halves of the country.

The “counter-escalation” which has no doubt taken place over the past two years, with the entry of North Vietnamese forces into South Vietnam, would certainly have been agreed with the NLF beforehand in all its details, and would have taken place in the manner and to the extent desired by the Front.

In any case, the North Vietnamese military presence in South Vietnam remains distinctly ancillary and geographically limited. Western estimates of the strength of this presence vary according to propaganda exigencies.

Thus, the Christian Science Monitor wrote on August 6: “Overall, North Vietnamese comprise between 15 and 20% of the total communist military strength in the south.” The same report gave the total NLF strength as 282,000, suggesting the number of “infiltrators” from North Vietnam would be between 42,300 and 56,400.

But by October, things had changed. President de Gaulle, in a speech in the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh, had called for the withdrawal of US troops, and Washington had countered with an offer that US troops would be withdrawn if North Vietnamese troops were also. In grave disquiet, a Saigon official told the US News and World Report (October 10):

We would not last six months without the Americans. In terms of manpower, the Allies would be taking away something like 350,000 men. The Vietnamese have only about 40,000 here, or about one-seventh of the total communist personnel. A drop in the bucket . . .

There seems little reason not to accept this estimate, wrung from a Saigon politician in a moment of truth.

The massive American military onslaught has exacted a heavy toll in blood and treasure in both South and North Vietnam. How can they still express their confidence in victory? Wilfred Burchett has written (National Guardian, New York, November 5):

“Final victory” is not conceived as wiping out all Americans on South Vietnamese soil or throwing all Americans into the sea, still less imposing a total military defeat on the US. It means that the National Liberation Front leadership is confident that it can smash every offensive the US and its satellite
forces mount, that it can defeat every military and political manoeuvre, that it can impose heavy losses on enemy troops on a sharply rising scale, that it can continue to defend and enlarge the territory and population under its control; that in the end the US will see that there is no alternative but to pack up and go home.

The phrase “impose heavy losses on enemy troops on a sharply rising scale” is worth a moment’s examination. There can be no doubt that escalation has aborted the transition from the stage of balance of forces in the Vietnamese liberation war to the stage of counter-offensive. What the Americans have achieved in fact in two years of escalation is to “freeze” the war in the stage of balance of forces, denying the liberation armies the chance of victory in military counter-offensive but unable to move to such a stage themselves.

The question of the strategy to be adopted by the liberation forces has certainly been the subject of heated debate among the Vietnamese and among their closest friends in the international arena. There seems little doubt that the Chinese have counselled a wholesale reversion to guerrilla war in face of the American build-up. Incidentally, such a step would have meant a lessening of the Vietnamese need for sophisticated military equipment such as the Soviet Union alone can supply. But this proposal has been resisted by the Vietnamese, with Soviet backing.

What appears to exist in South Vietnam at present is a unique combination of mobile warfare and guerrilla warfare, coinciding with the actual situation of the country, with guerrilla warfare showing a recent tendency to predominate. The “sharply rising scale” referred to in the Burchett passage would seem to indicate that the NLF leaders certainly contemplate a future stage at which mobile warfare would assume greater weight.

Like every other war, the Vietnam war is a politico-military phenomenon. When the war ends, as end it will, politics will weigh heavily in the balance. The political unity of the Vietnamese, and the world support for them, even in the conditions of the obdurate refusal of the Chinese leaders to take joint socialist-camp action in support of Vietnam, will play the key part in achieving peace. Putting it another way, the present crushing military and political isolation of the US and its supporters, including the Holt Government, will only be aggravated with the passage of time. The political realities of the Vietnamese nation will prevail.

The former Australian diplomat, Gregory Clark, in a remarkably perceptive essay in Fact, December 16 has written:

The classic example of how ineffective overwhelming military strength can be once the guerrillas have passed this “critical point” (in mobilising popular support) is Algeria. Here the French, by pouring men and arms into the country, had reduced the guerrilla numbers to a mere 5000. But in the process
of so doing, they had so antagonised the civilian population that they eventually realised that even if the guerrillas were completely immobilised they (the French) would still be unable to control the country. They had no alternative but to withdraw.

Reviewing the settlement of the Cuban missile crisis of 1962, the only recent international crisis of dimensions comparable with the Vietnam war, the thing that strikes one is its aspect of ambiguity. Four years after the settlement, the question of “Who won?” in Cuba is still the subject of debate. Supporters of the socialist cause see victory in the continued existence of socialist Cuba, while the upholders of the United States position see their victory confirmed by the removal of the Soviet missiles. Can we expect a similar ambiguity to hover around the eventual Vietnam settlement? It seems at least likely. It seems that a settlement of such an “ambiguous” character alone corresponds to the exigencies of the present delicate world power balance.

But nuclear balance of terror or no, social progress will find its way forward. Just as the continued life and activity of the revolutionary Cuban government is quite unambiguous, so too must be the reality of the independence of South Vietnam which will emerge from the war, even if it be slowly and in stages.

When in his January interview with Harrison Salisbury, the Premier of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Pham Van Dong, used the words “we will be generous in relation to peace terms at the eventual peace talks”, he was addressing middle-of-the-road South Vietnamese politicians as much as anybody else.

The two years of escalation have been years of barbarous assault on the people of Vietnam, south and north, two years of imperialist infamy, of reckless challenge to world peace, of a revival of reactionary forces around the globe who see in the escalation of the Vietnam war the advance signs of the war against the socialist world, to which their misanthropic aspirations are so closely wedded.

But they have also been years of unmatched glory in the history of the people of Vietnam, banner-bearers in the world of the 'sixties for the cause of national liberation and social progress, and years of a mighty and growing popular struggle against the policies of aggression in the United States, Australia and other countries.

The second anniversary of escalation in Vietnam sees the policy of escalation recognised by more human beings than ever before as the barbarous, reckless, self-defeating aggressive device that it is. It is a moment for Australians, whose government has made our country a party to this greatest international crime of our times, to salute the dauntless people of Vietnam who have foiled the policy of escalation and will eventually bring it to defeat.