Question: In the current struggle in Vietnam, how much does Vietnamese history determine attitudes?

Answer: One is tempted to say: Absolutely. A point which it seems to me is insufficiently grasped outside Vietnam is that in the minds of the chief actors, the Vietnamese, this struggle is predominantly a national struggle, a struggle for the rights of the Vietnamese nation. The fact that victory for the Vietnamese would enhance socialist and neutralist influence in South-east Asia, and would be a reverse for imperialism, is secondary for them. This is the essential social and political fact which is obscured by such formulations as "communist aggression," or Sir Robert Menzies' "southward thrust of Chinese communism," or a thousand and one other such formulations which not only grossly distort but also grossly exaggerate the international reference of the struggle in Vietnam.

One Vietnamese spokesman put it to me: "This is the last war we will have to fight. War will not be for our children." When he said "the last war" he meant the last of nearly 2,000 years of wars against foreign occupation—by Chinese and Mongols, French and Japanese, and now Americans. That kind of historical perspective is the property of every Vietnamese. For them the struggle now unfolding in resistance to American aggression is "merely" the latest, greatest and most mature of a whole series of independence struggles which have occurred across the history of the country. The experience of this long period is present, one can say, in all Vietnamese policies and attitudes in relation to the war.

Q.: Demands for counter-escalation by the USSR have been made in the West. How are
these demands assessed in Viet-

A.: The Vietnamese are parti-
sans of a policy of “limiting
the war,” as they put it. They
want to limit the war to Viet-
nam, and, in Vietnam, to South
Vietnam, the real seat of the
present conflict. Hence their
prime demand: stopping the
bombing of the North. Time
and again I was told that they
want to prevent the war from
spreading to China and the
Soviet Union. I was told ex-
plicitly and on several occa-
sions that a world war arising
over Vietnam would not im-
prove Vietnam’s situation, or
anyone else’s. This danger is a
factor always present in their
thinking, and not least in con-
nection with socialist support
and aid. Clearly, their estimate
of the likely US reaction in the
event of the Soviet Union
transforming the Vietnam issue
into a straight nuclear con-
frontation with the US is not
nearly as sanguine as some I
have heard expressed outside
Vietnam.

As things stand, Prime Minis-
ter Pham Van Dong told me
(interview published in Trib-
une, June 14) that “all the
socialist countries—the Soviet
Union, China and the others
—are supporting us and aiding
us with all their strength.”

This is not to say that there
are absolutely no difficulties in
relations with the socialist
countries in connection with
support and aid. But such dif-
culties, in the view of the Viet-
namese, are secondary factors,
to be dealt with in strictly bi-
lateral talks between the parties
concerned. For example, my
impression is that it was a re-
sult of just such talks as these
between the Vietnamese and
the Chinese that not many
months ago certain difficulties
in the flow of Soviet aid
through China were ironed out.

An important element over-
looked in the argument for all-
out counter-escalation by the
Soviet Union is Vietnamese
independence—that is, Viet-
namese independence in rela-
tions with Vietnam’s friends.
Anyone familiar with the Viet-
namese reality knows that this
is a very important element
indeed. It is the firm view of
the Vietnamese that it is Viet-
namese first of all who have
the right to make decisions on
the conduct of the war, not
Russians, Chinese or anyone
else.

In general, one can say that
of course the Russians could
“do more” for the Vietnamese.
So could all the other socialist
countries. So could we in Aus-
tralia. But in the matter of
aid from socialist countries it
is the Vietnamese who decide
what ought to be done. In to-
day’s circumstances, the Viet-
namese say repeatedly that
they are perfectly satisfied with
the state of affairs regarding
support and aid. There seems
little reason why their friends
outside Vietnam should not take their word for it.

Q.: Hawks in the USA claim that protest movements, such as those in Australia give North Vietnam an impression that it can achieve victory through the collapse of government in the USA, Australia, and so on. What do the North Vietnamese know about the protest movements and how do they regard them?

A.: I found the Vietnamese very well-informed about the protest movements, especially that in the United States. I also found them entirely without illusions about "winning the war in Washington." The hawkish argument referred to is a false and wicked one, designed to frighten and to paralyse the action of people in the Western countries who are politically and morally opposed to the Vietnam war. One sees it in its true light when one talks with the Vietnamese leaders about how they actually believe they will win the war. These men are not amateurs or dilettantes of war—they have no mean experience of it. They know that war is primarily a military phenomenon, and that it is in military terms, taken in conjunction with political factors at home and abroad, that wars are won and lost.

It is their military and political successes in Vietnam upon which they count to persuade the Americans to desist from their aggression. International factors can have a beneficent influence (or otherwise) on the struggle. But they are and will remain secondary to the evolution of events on the ground in Vietnam. Indeed, the Vietnamese are acutely aware that the international climate surrounding the war is to some extent conditioned by the course of military operations. One spokesman put it to me: "We deeply appreciate the aid of the socialist countries. But to merit it, and to continue to have it, we must fight well." No doubt they would expect the protest movement in the capitalist countries to rise as they score more military successes of the kind they have been recording in recent months, especially in the fighting just below the 17th parallel.

Pham Van Dong summed up the Vietnamese attitude on this question when he told me: "To the extent that the people of the United States, white and black come to realise that this war is a dirty war, that it is causing the US losses throughout the world; to the extent that they are worried about it, and see that they must struggle against it, we think this is a good thing. To that extent they are doing their duty as men of progress, working for the national interests of the US, properly understood. If they win, good luck to them. We applaud them. But we have
no illusions about counting on their activities to win the war." In a word, the Vietnamese see the protest movement against the war as primarily helpful to the countries in which it arises, while they value highly the support it provides for them in their struggle.

When I expressed to a representative of the Vietnam Lao Dong Party the view of the Communist Party of Australia that the struggle in our country against the Vietnam war was vital to Australia’s national future, and was by no means merely a matter of extending support to the Vietnamese, he was particularly appreciative. He intimated that not all parties at all times had made this kind of appraisal of the significance of the struggle against the Vietnam war.

Q.: A few months ago you wrote on Vietnam in ALR and said that there would be compromises in the course of a settlement in Vietnam. Do you still hold the same view?

A.: I agree with Wilfred Burchett who wrote in his latest book, *Vietnam North*: “So far neither Hanoi nor Washington has realistically set out the steps that could be taken to end the war.” There is a school of thought which holds that even to breathe the word compromise is to betray the Vietnamese people. Adherents of this school of thought display a ferocious readiness to wage war, as it were by proxy, until the last Vietnamese. The approach of such sidelines strategists is a million miles from that of the Vietnamese leaders, who are acutely conscious of the suffering caused their people by the war, and who will not permit the war to go on one minute longer than is absolutely necessary to guarantee the national rights of Vietnam.

The essential condition for a peace settlement is that the US should decide to abandon its project to dominate South Vietnam. As I have said above, the Vietnamese believe this decision will be reached primarily as a result of military-political developments in Vietnam. But the US is still a good, long way from reaching this decision. The Vietnamese warned me repeatedly that the war will become intense in the time ahead, that there will be new steps in escalation. So, the essential element for a settlement being absent, it is natural that each side should still be making as it were maximal demands. That is what diplomacy is like. Present stances on both sides, as Burchett says, are not altogether “realistic.”

Once the Americans have made it clear that they are prepared to concede Vietnamese independence, all kinds of new diplomatic positions—say on the how and when of American military withdrawal from South
Vietnam—will become possible. Having said that, it should be added that the Vietnamese official positions as they stand, both that of the Democratic Republic in the North and that of the National Liberation Front in the South, are put forward merely as the basis—the expression "most correct basis" has often been used—for negotiations. And the key to all progress in a settlement of the war remains the American acceptance of the quite limited Vietnamese demand for the unconditional and permanent cessation of the bombing raids and all other acts of war against the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Once that demand has been acceded to, talks can begin between the US and the Democratic Republic, and a whole new climate created on all questions concerning the war, including to some extent those affecting South Vietnam.

Q.: Some critics suggest that aid from socialist countries is both inadequate and inferior and that Vietnam tries to keep aloof from world communist disputes. What is the real position about aid, and about Vietnam's view of other communist movements?

A.: I have quoted Pham Van Dong as saying that the Soviet Union and the other socialist countries are "supporting and aiding" Vietnam "with all their strength." The words, I imagine, were not lightly used. As far as the Soviet Union is concerned, it was borne strongly home to me in the course of my stay in Vietnam that the change from Khrushchov's leadership in October 1964 marked a radical improvement in relations between the Soviet Union and Vietnam. Prime Minister Kosygin's February 1965 visit to the Democratic Republic, which was already being bombed by the US, symbolised the new situation. It is clear from what I learnt in Vietnam that the October 1964 changes in the Soviet leadership were at least in part the reflection in socialist world politics of the new stage in the Vietnam war which was then beginning. (It will be recalled that the first step in escalation of the war to North Vietnam was the US bombing of Tonkin Gulf which took place in August 1965).

Concerning quality of aid, the limiting factor here appeared to be not lack of socialist willingness to provide more sophisticated weaponry but the lack of Vietnamese technical cadres to handle this weaponry independently. This side of things is receiving the constant and active attention of all parties concerned.

Rejection by the Communist Party of China of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union's repeated proposals for unity in support of the Vietnam struggle is a serious and
damaging complication. Vietnam, however, holds “aloof” from world communist disputes in the sense that it makes no public statements openly espousing the viewpoint of either side. But this is as far as its “aloofness” goes. When the record can be made public, I feel sure that Vietnam’s years-long campaign of vigorous and hard-hitting private bilateral discussions with brother socialist countries will be found to have played no small part in minimising the effects of current divisions. As regards present day socialist-camp politics, one of the most fascinating aspects of the Vietnamese scene is that neither in the press nor in discussion does one ever come across the slightest reference to the “great proletarian cultural revolution” which is raging just across the border in China.

Q.: Since it is admitted that the extent of the bombing of Vietnam now exceeds the bombing of Europe in World War II, how is it possible for economic life to continue?

A.: The key weapons appear to be mass political unity for the construction of socialism in war conditions, and to defeat American aggression and correct organisational measures to carry this political unit into practical effect. The mass political unity for the prosecution of the people’s war in the North, as in the South, is greater today than it has ever been. As in World War II, the mass bombing of civilian targets has not demoralised people, but has done the opposite. The organisational steps taken to implement this political unity have been brilliantly imaginative and bold.

Policies of dispersal of industry, schools, hospitals and various government departments from the cities of North Vietnam have cut the urban population to approximately one million (from about three million before escalation began). In other cities, the mass building of air raid shelters for those remaining is in itself an achievement of note, reflecting the active and courageous response of North Vietnam to the air war. Industry has “gone regional”, or “gone local”, in marked contrast to the policy of building big centralised plants and complexes which characterised earlier years of North Vietnamese socialism. There is also a sociological base to Vietnam’s power to resist the air war: being an agrarian society, whose industry had barely been born before it was faced with the threat of being bombed out of existence, it is capable of “falling back to the countryside” in a manner which could not be dreamed of in an urbanised, European-type society.

Q.: How are the proposed elections in South Vietnam being viewed?
A.: To be perfectly frank, I don’t know. That is, apart from the fact that I am sure they are not being viewed as an authentic exercise in South Vietnamese democracy. Elections held in the shadow of half a million US bayonets do not commend themselves as being a fair expression of national will. A remarkable feature of my most recent visit to Vietnam is that there was practically no mention of Saigon politics. This is in sharp contrast to my previous time there, 1958-60, when there was constant talk of what the “My-Diem (American Diem) clique” were doing. The difference, it seems to me, reflects a profound change in the Vietnamese scene. Diem was taken seriously as a figure potentially capable of erecting a relatively long-lived, right-wing-based nationalist regime in South Vietnam. So they talked about him. Ky and the present Saigon junta have no such prospects. So they don’t talk about them. It’s as simple as that.

No doubt in North Vietnam they know a lot about Saigon politics, even today, but in conversations with foreign pressmen on brief visits it seems they have more important things to discuss. The war has become what is virtually a nation-wide war against an American expeditionary force of almost half a million men and against a good part of the American air force and navy. Ky and the elections and the rest only exist as a function of this vast foreign military presence. I have no doubt that Ky’s decision at the end of June to step down from the “presidential race” would be put down in North Vietnam rather to the diplomatic expertise of US Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker than to any independent judgment Ky might have made of the situation.

VERY OFTEN we find that science and technology are forcing us to get rid of our short-sighted views. Against our will we find a new behavior forced on us which, finally, we recognise as being in the line of man’s spiritual progress; the fostering of intellectual activities thanks to the take-over by the machine of the greater part of our material activities; socialisation which when properly understood, tears us away from our egoism and helps us discover the fullness which the person can discover in collective realisations; knowledge of nature and its mastery which thrills and enriches us.