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Vietnam - A Modern American Tragedy, 1967.

Sermon
Sunday, October 29, 1967

Rabbi Daniel J. Silver

#208

Vietnam - A Modern American Tragedy

Tragedy is not a Hebrew characteristic of thought. There is no native word in Hebrew to express that sense of an inescapable shadowed dark fate, of an inexorable destiny which pursues Man, a chain of events which cannot be broken. Modern Hebrew expresses the idea of tragedy by borrowing the Greek term - tragedy becomes 'tragilia'. Simply to use a word as a coin of speech is not to accept it into one's elemental philosophy. Judaism denies that history is pre-destined, human life is pre-determined; but life is what we make it out to be, and history is the sum of human achievements and of human failings.

The bloodshed, Vietnam, need not have happened. We need not have been involved in Vietnam in the first place. There is no traditional American sphere of influence in Southeast Asia. The perimeter of our National Defense does not begin, or rest, or end, in that part of the world. Until 1954, there was not a single American soldier in Southeast Asia. We could then have accepted the hard-worked-out decisions of Geneva, made largely for the neutralization of Indo-China and spoke of a plebiscite within two years on the possibility of reunification of North and of South Vietnam. We need not have made Vietnam a cardinal element in our national strategy. And even assuming that we accepted in good faith and full understanding Secretary Dulles's determination -- his dream, if you will -- to turn South Vietnam into the very, very model of a very, very modern Asian democracy, we could have limited our aid to economic support and not sent in military technicians and guns and tanks and planes.

It is well to remember that in 1954, South Vietnam was not threatened by external aggression of any kind, that our intelligence did not find the first North Vietnamese soldier in South Viet Nam until late in 1960 and early 1961. When it became clear that Diem used the language of democracy: social change, land

reform, public welfare -- as a pretense to gall Washington into giving him all manner of aid and that he was, in fact, a more modern version of the traditional oriental Mandarin, the feudal tyrant who ruled by power, by his will, who stamped out all opposition, who will not permit democracy and freedom in his land, we could have called back our technicians, we could have ceased all military aid, we could have curtailed, if not stopped our economic aid. American foreign policy did not rest on the support of one Asian general who had never been elected by any kind of vote to the leadership of his people.

I said as much to you a decade ago, the sermon which I called: "America and World Revolution". From this pulpit, I tried to detail the sad history of Vietnam. I tried to show how our best-laid plans to improve the standard of living, to permit economic and land reform, had gone to naught. We had poured in money which had been grabbed and taken unto itself by a few hands. We had sent money for dams, and for farms, and for seed; and the money had bought Cadillacs, air-conditioning units, swelled the bank accounts of certain of the coterie of Diem in Switzerland. We looked to Diem to support our policy of containment, that naive policy of drawing a line about the world, saying to the communist world, "Thus far shalt thou go and no further." We've sent him guns and planes and tanks, presumably to fight communism, insurrection, with them when, in fact, we should have known he would use these guns, our uniforms, and our bullets simply to equip his national police to suppress all dissidents.

I spoke to you then of the traditional military bandit groups which abounded in the South Vietnamese countryside and reminded you that we were helping to bring about their swelling in number by adding to them a stream of political exiles, a stream of young student idealists who had been disillusioned, a stream of people who knew who was the enemy - Saigon - Diem - and who was the support

of the enemy - Washington and our national administration. I warned then that the small communist coteries which had always existed in that part of the world, as they exist everywhere, were being given all manner of aid and comfort by our actions because they could point out the enemy and the colonial power which supported the enemy; and they could make good on the one promise which the dissidents, the revolutionaries of the Viet Cong needed above all else. They could procure arms, bring in supplies, make possible revolution. And I suggested then that the United States would do well to review its policy of military assistance and military aid to nations which have no other credentials than the credentials of anti-communism. Anti-communism in Asia translates to mean an opposition to the demands and the rights of the emerging mass, the traditional ninety per cent of the Asian poor who have been held down and oppressed and persecuted racially by their own overlords.

I warned them that to support the tyrants of yesteryear is to invite frustration, court serious defeat. In the intervening decade, we have tasted, have we not, the bitter lees of that frustration; we have faced, and do face, the defeat of our policy to create an American foothold in Southeast Asia, to insist that all values are the values by which Southeast Asia must govern itself.

Now let's put South Vietnam aside for the moment. One could argue that the events in South Vietnam, given the original mistake, were inevitable; but have we learned our lesson, are we re-aligning our strategy and our policy so that there will never again be a southeast Asia, never again be a war which no one wanted, for reasons no one fully understands, in a part of the world which is not of crucial interest to the United States.

Four years ago, there were 35,000 American troops in South Vietnam. Ten years ago, the revolution in the countryside was hardly talked about. Today there are 35,000 American troops in Thailand, and the revolution in the country-

Vietnam - A Modern American Tragedy
(Page 4)

side of northeastern provinces is hardly talked about. Six years ago, we were supporting a military junta which we said was racially one with that of its own country in Saigon, and we were busy helping that government to make itself a model western-style technologically-advanced democracy. Today - Thailand - we are supporting with arms and with aid a feudal allegarchy which claims that it is setting about to make Thailand into the very, very model of a very, very modern western state. We face the open opposition of those traditional castes, classes, and groups which are outside the camp, denied any rights; and we are again allied with the bankrupt forces of yesteryear, the forces which suppress labor unions, which censor the press, which deny reform.

There were 35,000 American troops in South Vietnam four years ago; there are half a million today and 35,000 American troops in Thailand today. Pray God there will not be half a million four years from now.

When it came time to review the year 1960, the time when there were only twelve hundred, eighteen hundred, American military technicians in South Vietnam, I warned against the policy of military escalation. I said to you: "Every attempt to settle and to accommodate the issue within United Nations, if possible, without if necessary, should be attempted before large-scale, helter-skelter military commitments are made by our nation to the present government, commitments which cannot only create another Korea but which can create the holocaust we all fear." Unfortunately those attempts and accommodations which I suggested were not rigorously prosecuted and, unfortunately, those helter-skelter military commitments were made and made again.

Today, thirteen thousand and some American young men have lost their lives in southeast Asia, a quarter of a million men, women, and children of both camps, armed and civilian, have been killed. I am told that this benighted land looks today as if it were a blasted lunar landscape. More bombs have fallen on South Vietnam than on the entire European continent during the second World War.

Devastation, defoliation, carnage, and destruction beyond credence and beyond belief. Today, we not only face a policy which seems incapable of achieving its limited objectives in Vietnam but we are courting the very danger that all of us fear, that this nation will become embroiled in a land war in Asia against the most populous nation in the world, against the largest nation in that continent. We admit today to regular over flights to the Chinese mainland. We have begun drum beating in Washington, a kind of holy crusade against what the Vice President called last week, "the militant, aggressive, communism of the Asian variety which has its headquarters in Peking. We are close to that holocaustual war, the war which can only end with defeat for all -- so close that its spectre haunts us. Yet, strangely, we have yet to find the first Chinese soldier in the Vietnamese war. Strange to behold, and strange to accept is the simple truth that the North Vietnamese have not yet permitted the Chinese to enter their land and to support them in this war in which they are David and we are Goliath.

From the very beginning, we have blinded ourselves to the facts of Vietnamese nationalism, to their millennial fear of the great Chinese power north of their borders. From the very beginning, we refused to accept the simple fact that one of the reasons Ho Chi Minh accepted the 1954 Geneva Declaration was the fact that it placed men who were supervisors and observers on his northern border and precluded Chinese infiltration of North Vietnam. And refusing, as we did, to allow Vietnamese nationalism to take its own course, saying that we were in Asia to preclude the advance of China, we have succeeded really in bringing about, or almost bringing about the very thing that we say we fear.

In 1950, General MacArthur warned us against a land war in Asia. He said we could not win it; our strength lay in guns, and in planes, and in technological advance, and not in manpower. Such a war can be fought only by men,

and we have found that to be true in southeast Asia. In 1954, the Joint Chiefs of Staff overruled the State Department's suggestion that we fly military support to the French at Bien Dien Pu because they said that this was the first step in a progression and escalation in military activity that could lead to a land war in southeast Asia; and we ought never to be fighting on the land in that jungle, in that swamp, in that quagmire. Yet, here we are today, knee-deep in the mud; we have lost almost a division of men, a great deal of prestige, a great deal of our confidence; and we are helping to hasten that day which we say we fear, in which we will have to take on the armies, the naked manpower of the most populous nation in the world. It's not a pretty picture.

We have made one mistake after another, after another. And what I deny, and the reason I cite all this past history is not to take any pride in being a political analyst or political prophet. You don't have to be a clairvoyant to know that if you back the forces of reaction you are tied to the past, that if you back the feudal dictator you cannot be in tune with the new spirit of the new age, that if we are friends of the allegarchs we are not friends of the revolutionaries, that if we insist upon a policy of naive anti-communism we see clearly the facts of the realities of the policy of southeast Asia. I cite this history simply to insist that there have been alternatives all along the line and that there is an alternative now - an alternative to more bombs, and more planes, and more death, and more Napalm, and more coffins, and more destruction - and that alternative is not escalation, that feckless military policy of bombing more sites, possibly even invading North Vietnam, overflying China, search and kill, search and kill again. That policy is the escalation of negotiation, of admitting the possibility of peace and acting on that admission.

Vietnam - A Modern American Tragedy
(Page 7)

Washington has agreed that negotiations are necessary, that there is no alternative to going it alone, to following out this tragedy to its ultimate devastating conclusion. For two and a half years, the President has talked about negotiations; but he has said that his hands are tied because of Ho Chi Minh's adamant refusal to negotiate, his dismissal of our problems; and I for one consider his dismissals of our offers to be foolish, stupid. Considering the American temper, I believe that Mr. Minh could win at the conference table all that he can legitimately seek, and that is the neutralization of southeast Asia, that is the possibility of the unification of these two countries, that is the elimination of an American military presence from the area. I can accept his dismissal and explain it only on the grounds that he is determined to make the proud American eagle eat humble crow. But, having said this, I remain confirmed in the belief that Washington has another alternative besides taking the military steps one by one which lead to the greater danger. We have the alternative of admitting that the Viet Cong control large areas of southeast Asia, of trying to get the Saigon government and the Viet Cong to arrange local agreement. We have the alternative of ceasing the bombing of North Vietnam now, not a month from now when the weather forces it, now when it would be an act to show the world that we are interested in peace and not a month from now when it is simply a military convenience designed, as everyone will know, to silence the critics at home. And we can, without cost to ourselves in the great order, cease the bombing because, as the Secretary of Defense himself said, the bombing cannot, has not, and will not completely interdict the supply by North Vietnam of its regulars in the field.

We have the alternative of using the great technological power that we have, our knowledge, to play the peace game instead of the war game, to escalate the possibility of negotiations, not to escalate the possibility of

military confrontation, to arrange local negotiations in the field between Saigon and the Viet Cong, to arrange international negotiations between Washington and Hanoi, either directly or through a third party, or through a reconvening of the Geneva Conference, or through the United Nations, or through any other such source. The possibilities exist, but they have not yet begun to be explored. It is not a question of either or - either Ho accepts our demands and our offers as they are made, or we fight on - there is a large gray area in between. We have not begun to parse this area down, to look at it carefully, to put it under a microscope, to see if we are indeed listening to every opportunity and taking advantage of every offer.

The Indian Ambassador to the United Nations said some very important things three weeks ago. He said, in effect, that his government's understanding of Hanoi's position was that it does not prohibit, preclude negotiation. What Hanoi will not accept is a negotiation to which it must come as a tired almost defeated nation where it will be handed what? - A Korean type settlement which will say: "the seventeenth parallel remains; you remain north of the parallel, we remain south." The United States did not have a presence south of that parallel before 1954. North Vietnam has fought Goliath to a standstill to preclude that presence. Ho will not come to the table if he feels that this is the peace that he is being offered. The peace that he can accept, as the Indian Ambassador made it clear, was a Laotian type peace, a peace which speaks not of a permanent Korean division between north and south but of a temporary division, of a neutralization of the area, of a popular front kind of government in Saigon which will represent the entire South Vietnamese country, not just those who are our allies, and finally our withdrawal of all of our forces from that part of the world.

Now this is not an American victory, such a negotiation; it means the burial, the end of Dulles's ambition to create the pro-western small state, that

Vietnam - A Modern American Tragedy
(Page 9)

toehold in South Vietnam. Is the alternative acceptable? Can we continue to accept death, carnage, and destruction, the possibility of war with China, for the small advantage of having a country in our camp who are our allies in the sense that we support them entirely financially and militarily and who will certainly want, ultimately, only one thing: Yankee go home.

We have paid a terrible price for our mistakes in southeast Asia. To negotiate peace is to pay another price; it is to pay the price of frustration, frustrated ambitions. Surely the opposition party which now is beginning to talk of peace and of alternatives to Vietnam would make an issue in the national election of appeasement and of national pride. The hawks would scream. Surely the fall-out from South Vietnam is such today that we cannot continue to accept it. It has alienated many of our traditional allies because they cannot see the validity, either in cold-blooded geo-political terms or morally, of our actions. And they know, far better than we, that this pre-occupation with South Vietnam has precluded our concerns elsewhere in the world. Why were the United States actions in June vis-a-vis Israel in the Near East so weak and so vacillating? Why could not the United States line up other nations to go with it through the Gulf of Aqaba to show that this was indeed an international waterway? Because the military said to the President: "Our troops are committed; we cannot fight a second front, we cannot take the chance." And western Europe knows this quite well. It knows that we have had to pull troops out of NATO and knows that we have had to weaken our defense and our commitment, and knows that we have papered over this weakening of our commitments but that it in fact exists.

This involvement in southeast Asia has had a tragic fall-out far beyond the coffins which flood into our national cemetery. It has made for inflation at home. It has helped to drive the other America deeper into its poverty; more is being made but the poor can buy less. It has forced the government to

cut back many of its ambitious programs for that one legitimate war, the war on poverty. The government brings in demonstration projects to the Congress, not projects which will really help, but which will simply bring in studies. Congress cuts these in half. The poor are poorer and more desperate in their plight, and the voice of revolutionary militancy rises in the land and becomes a voice that says we will force the cities to a standstill, we will paralyze your communities. The war is portrayed as a racial war, white bodies against yellow bodies and white bombs against yellow huts. The voice of Negro militancy makes much of this racial element and there is open writing in some of our magazines of the Negro troop mutiny. And this war has alienated some of the most sensitive and some of the best of our youth. During the second World War, one in a thousand young men applied as conscientious objectors; I am told that the ratio now is one in three hundred. And this ratio is in itself false, it does not take in the hundreds upon thousands of young people who are remaining at their studies and finding other convenient ways of getting around the draft laws, determined never to serve their country in a war whose validity they do not accept, never to risk their lives for a policy which they cannot follow. We have driven some into open rebellion. They march on our government, they vilify our President, they have taken themselves out of society and, far more, far more are determined to find some other alternative than that of the naive kind of patriotism. This alienation of our youth is a tragic cost to pay for a war which we cannot put an end to and in which we never should have been involved.

Our youth are alienated, the colored in our cities are alienated, most of us feel puzzled, bemused by the inability of our government to take itself in hand, to conquer this need to save face, to find practical solutions to a practical problem. We find ourselves growingly incredulous of our government. There is this credibility gap about which so much has been written. We cannot for-

get that in 1965 we were promised that the men would be home by Christmas. We cannot forget that we were told once that we were in this war to preserve a little democracy fighting against subversion, fighting for its freedom, that it became patently obvious to us that South Vietnam was not a democracy fighting for its freedom. We were told that we were in this war because we had commitments and the nature of these commitments were never made clear to us. And now we are told that we are in this war to contain Asian communism, China. The rules of the game, the explanations have been changed on us time and again. We like the government to be honest with us. We like, by our decision and by our vote, to be able to express our attitudes towards governmental policy. This too has been denied us. Wherever we turn, wherever we look, Vietnam has exacted a terrible, terrible price from the American people. We hope to organize our financial resources, our lush resources to fight the battle of our cities. We have had to put this aside, to put it in mothballs, to shelve it for the moment.

We thought to organize a twenty-year war against poverty ultimately to destroy this scourge, this blight, from our land; and that too has been shelved. We thought to find ways of turning the hearts of the parents to the children, the children to the parents, of creating a good society, not simply an affluent and abundant society. Instead we have pulled generations further and further apart. We thought to teach them of democracy, and they find that they are in a country where they must simply accept and abide and do as they are ordered; and before they can vote, many of them may die in a jungle which they cannot even locate on the map.

The game was not worth a candle. The mistakes have been many. And the solution? The solution, as I have said often from this pulpit, is withdrawal, negotiation. Every step which we take towards greater escalation makes ultimately that withdrawal more difficult. Every step of escalation makes our commitment, underscores our commitment, makes it more firm. Every life we lose

is a life that we have to explain, and how does one explain lives which seem unnecessarily lost? The time is now for negotiation, for the bombing to pause, for the escalation of negotiation, ultimately for withdrawal.

The President said a year ago when he offered negotiations on his own terms that, once these were completed, he would pull back every single American soldier and every single American Marine in southeast Asia. Obviously land forces in that part of the world are not necessary to our national defense. Why then are they there? Why must we keep them there, and how long must we keep them there? How long can this nation suffer being pulled apart by a cause which seems hardly worth it, by a struggle which we cannot fully comprehend, in a war which outrages our sensitivities and confuses our wisdom.

Tragedy is not a Hebrew category of thought. Hebrew does not have a native word to express this sense of the inevitability of history. It is not inevitable that we enter a land war against China. It is not inevitable that we send our troops north of the seventeenth parallel and invade North Vietnam. It is not inevitable that we bomb Hanoi and mine the harbor at Haiphong. It is not inevitable that we pursue the war with greater and greater determination; we may, but it is not inevitable. We may but, in my humble opinion, it would be tragic.

There is another alternative, to take ourselves in hand, to admit that strategic mistakes were made, to begin the careful deliberate determined examination of the possibilities of escalation of negotiations, to see what arrangements can be made in the MaKong in the hill country, in the northern sector, in this province and in that, between the locals and the locals, between us and the North Vietnamese. There are alternatives - it is not a question of either - or. The shadows are long and the day is late, and the war is violent; and it will take a great leader, a great nation, to be able to

Vietnam - A Modern American Tragedy
(Page 13)

take a different path now. I can only hope and pray that seven years from now I will not review my notes and say, "The tragedy has come; the cost is great; but what can I say except that it could have been otherwise?" Amen....



years that Dr. had had used his position of head & command
reform stated he had abandoned a democratic attitude for
militarism, we could have ^{still} pulled out our feet right
when we needed an orderly shipping, & delayed our
removal into. It did not require the gift of prophecy to
know years to recognize that a policy of massive retaliation
communist was leading us to V.N. and other - but
we were not fast enough ourselves until and and
to backstage force of pressure & reaction against the
kind of persecution they, I said in mid-60s you 7 years ago
from the pulpit under a prophet the communist
Wood Rev. I did not know the United Jewish Organ
repression - field a the subject that the public was
done with our own, clearly an unfair, &
known to be a series was organizing racial passion a
S.V.N. - & usually to with a lot of violence S.V.N. board &
paramilitary groups until a series of white supremacy
& disaffected young identities, The result was the U.C.
& predictably the communist question the U.C. of
but just small communist could under could
and paid to the unemployed energy - much greater on

the, led, but the Q. asked as to any number which would
provide the evaluation could mean. In that case I
pledged for an end to military aid & military assistance to
governments which have no other credentials than anti-
communism - which they intended to mean antipathy to
the active mass & these unlimited unpleasant. I said
then that "to support the growth of anti-communism is to ask
to be protected, to avoid serious defeat", & that
returning your machine to the little fruit of
that function & of the possibility of defeat of an
policy of anti-communism support now have one
benefit to the cause of V.N., we are reporting an
increase - how far has the Thailand in anti-
anti-communist funding all years which is an extra degree
sum as an support & fact of rebellion in
the N.E. territory. There are 25,000 men
born in Thailand, I must have say it will be
before we have 1/2 million, 34,000 men
had by 35,000 men in V.N.

Every attempt to settle the immediate
 economic needs of the people -
 without of course - should be attempted
 before large scale, better shelter and
 employment are made by an attempt to
 be present quit. - committed which can
 not only make the Korean but which
 can make the United States all poor.

[illegible]

get to enter battle against us

I demand no pleasures from these reluctant friends -
the ambiguities of uncommitted have long been self-evident -
I understand these statements simply to mean the fact
that these men allow to prevent growing involvement
as to the more no to the world - to make the
present world these are allow to a judicious policy
of military escalation which I say is daddy absolutely
that reluctant stupidity to lead us into Communist
domination.

WRHS



The present question for the past 2 1/2 years has been
of open negotiations - but we are driven into the hands of
the Nazi, the policy of retained target, the movement
of an open target, by Harvard's silence. In
my estimation Harvard's reticence is stupid. One to
American League, the the much would have at the
Conference Table the neutralization of V.V.I. U Parade
Front Unit in Europe, all the conditions which
would fully make possible W.N.A. recognition.
I am interested to show only a determination
to make the present conditions right and good.

Week 2 in with a report on Washington's activities and
given the's apparent silence there is no celebration
planned to stay - possibly more & more more with
this just previous. There is no disturbance in
attention to military situation - the situation
of day-giant, - a report of the military of U.C. in the
in center view - the end of the building and
already in Sec. M. V. ... an advantage has not
can not prevent now supplying the camp of the U.C. -
established and control between the camp and
the U.C. to establish control of control and control
ones.

the Indian understand no control at the U.C.
2 weeks ago, there is not a document - negotiation in
not end of the question - They are end of the question only
in day in the U.C. persons for military military - very
as long as control from that it control in control at
conflict, there is a definite control control in
serving for peace and as an control control control in
control control control control control control control control
present to a control, The control control control control

must be such that Hanoi feel assured that it will
 gain not a Korean withdrawal - under the Tito you
into - a crisis V.D. - but a future type withdrawal
 which will admit my policy to peace - begin to
 by deed the concrete military presence.

In one respect the world is affected by a defect in U.S. policy. Sec. Dulles' idea of proportion shows an S.U.N. -
an American long-haul that is inevitable - unavoidable
be shattered, but we do need to recall that before 1954
we did not have a single soldier in S. E. Asia & that there
is no national defense requirement that we maintain such
force in the future. The President has said we must not
be pulled in by the pull out and
every soldier is expensive once peace is established.

[illegible]

and a number of second dates - W.N. is
 third party interests - the majority of the group
 Conference - very on sophisticated knowledge can
 not be used to serve only the cause of university
peace action.

[illegible]

admits the same point, it has described him,
educated, brought money into the area & about
to be integrated helped, it has not a very good
of his people and even in algebra the world was
& down from a few million of dollars
people who for the rest of the subject - more
broken him have dropped as C.U.W. was on the North.

It clearly is clear - the entire response of
the people of Argentina to Egypt was in reaction
it was because was in the united
element - it was in the fact
as a man which is in the fact - which
was the little same - as in the fact
and particularly freedom in the fact is
needed for political stability.

The time is long past due for the U.S. to react to
type - to reject balance and imposed - to let the
hand down - the power down

