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UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE  
CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY

# INDOCHINA: TO HEAL THE WOUNDS OF WAR

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*Submitted to the  
House Committee on  
International Relations  
by Edward W. Doherty  
November 1975*

United States - Foreign Relations



Like most Americans of conscience, the Catholic bishops of the United States have long been concerned, indeed anguished, at the dreadful human consequences of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam and Cambodia. In their November 1966 statement on peace, the bishops expressed the fear that "there is grave danger that the . . . war in Vietnam may in time diminish our moral sensitivity to its evils."

In fact, as the bishops noted in 1967, "the moral sensitivity of the American people [did] not diminish but increased and intensified." In 1971, the bishops expressed the view

that whatever good we hope to achieve through continued involvement in this war is now outweighed by the destruction of human life and of moral values which it inflicts. It is our firm conviction, therefore, that the speedy ending of this war is a moral imperative of the highest priority. Hence, we feel a moral obligation to appeal urgently to our nation's leaders and indeed to the leaders of all the nations involved in this tragic conflict to bring the war to an end with no further delay.

In 1972, after calling on Americans to turn their attention "to the task of reconciliation not only in Southeast Asia but also in our own country," the bishops made the following appeal for aid to the afflicted countries of Southeast Asia:

Generosity must also mark our participation in efforts to rebuild the war-torn nations and societies of Southeast Asia. There can be no doubt that the people of North and South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia have suffered a tragedy far greater than ours. The dramatic and successful programs of aid and reconstruction carried out by the United States following World War II provide a model for what is demanded of us now. We must be unstinting in the expending of our moral, material and technical resources and skills on behalf of the people of Southeast Asia who have suffered so grievously.

As recently as March of 1975, the President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, Archbishop Joseph L. Bernardin of Cincinnati, urged support of efforts to provide humanitarian aid to the South Vietnamese people. He cited a Holy Week statement by Pope Paul VI: "Let us do everything we can to alleviate the tragedy of those people and to prove to them that our world is not indifferent to the cries of our brethren."

Archbishop Bernardin asked his fellow Catholics to "be mindful of the suffering of the Vietnamese people and to support all efforts, especially those of a multinational character, to render them emergency aid of a humanitarian nature." He expressed the particular hope that the U.S. Catholic Conference would contribute to the necessary public dialogue on such matters. Americans, he said, cannot be detached or indifferent; we "cannot turn our backs as a nation on a situation we helped to create."

It now appears that these appeals for reconciliation have not been heeded. The moral sensitivity that was aroused in the American people in the late 1960's and early 1970's

The Jewish-Christian tradition places strong emphasis upon reconciliation and healing after periods of corporate conflict. When the war is over, we must work at making the peace. It is time for America to turn its attention to binding up the wounds of war both at home and abroad. Nothing is to be gained by maintaining an atmosphere of hostility between the nations. Sitting together at the table of nations and opening communication are certain paths to understanding and reconciliation.

To begin the process of reconciliation, we should examine first the need for post-war reconstruction of the lands devastated by war. Currently, an embargo stemming from the Trading with the Enemy Act limits humanitarian aid and prevents shipments of tools and small machinery to the people of Indochina. This embargo, which prevents the free flow of assistance to the people of North Vietnam, South Vietnam and Cambodia, prevents genuine efforts by the American people to express their concern for healing the wounds of war.

The Trading with the Enemy Act was created in 1917 to prevent support for the Germans against whom we had declared war. To those on the "Z" list, it prevents the exportation of any materials without Treasury Department license; further, a license from the Commerce Department is required if goods are to be shipped from the United States.

The Act has been perpetuated by Presidents for purposes which go beyond its original aim. It appears to be used today to prevent the economic reconstruction of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the Republic of South Vietnam and Cambodia. Licenses have been granted solely for shipment of medical supplies. They have generally been denied for shipments of simple equipment which might help the people reclaim lands uncultivated for years so as to begin to return crop production to pre-war levels.

Private agencies attempting to give relief to war victims in Indochina have met with delay and denial in response to their applications for purchase and shipment of assistance materials for Indochina. The Bach Mai Hospital Relief Fund was forced to delay shipment of life-saving medical equipment and medicines for more than nine months pending a U.S. government decision. The American Friends Service Committee, which applied for and received licenses to purchase not only medical supplies, but also reconstructive materials such as fish nets, rototillers and lathes for building wooden limbs, was then denied a license to ship those items because the U.S. government deemed them economic assistance. The Mennonite Central Committee, which has operated a service agency in South Vietnam for ten years and has supplied materials for humanitarian assistance and reconstruction in the past, was denied a license to purchase \$75,000 worth of rototillers to reclaim land for agricultural production. Only in the last few days were these license applications reconsidered and granted, but such applications continue to be considered only on a case-by-case basis.

While Cuba is also on the same "Z" list, many evidences of ending that embargo are apparent. Trade with the Soviet Union and China, once also on the highly restricted list, is now open to all but strategic materials. We view flexibility in American policy toward the new governments

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has virtually disappeared with the ending of our involvement in Southeast Asia. The notable exception has been the compassionate response of many Americans under the leadership of the Administration and of church people to the plight of Indochinese refugees. The outpouring of generosity evident in this response suggests that the American people are capable of "going the extra mile" under enlightened national leadership.

The absence of substantial discussion as to whether we have any continuing responsibility toward the peoples whose personal lives and institutions were so drastically disrupted, cannot be justified morally. We, as a people, must not permit considerations of "victory" or "defeat" to turn us away from our traditions of generosity and reconciliation, or blind us to the needs of other human beings who have suffered so grievously.

The U.S. government effort to stop even the small-scale, voluntary efforts by a few persons and organizations to make relief and reconstruction supplies available to Indochina is not in the spirit of reconciliation. The licensing procedure currently in effect prevents private shipments of all but medical supplies and relief goods, thereby denying the possibility to private citizens and voluntary agencies of shipping simple implements and tools such as fish nets, agricultural implements and materials for spinning and weaving. It is difficult to see how the export of such items to Vietnam, items which are freely exportable to China and the U.S.S.R., can be against the interest of the United States.

This testimony is being offered in support of HR 9503 which would amend the Trading with the Enemy Act to permit the private shipment of relief supplies to Indochina and the shipment of supplies and equipment for rehabilitation and reconstruction of the war-torn economies of the region.

By easing these restrictions, as Senator Hatfield, author of a similar bill in the Senate (S. 2607), has pointed out, "Congress can bring to an end a counterproductive policy which is destructive of logic and purpose . . . [and] can begin a normalization of relations which will, I am convinced, prove a benefit to both the people of Vietnam and ourselves." Senator Hatfield also believes that moving towards a normalization of relations would be a sensible response to diplomatic initiatives and might open the way to a "rational and sane dialogue" on the fate of the remaining POW's and MIA's in Vietnam, an objective which we, too, heartily support.

We must start somewhere to rid ourselves of the notion that after ten years of war, 50,000 American casualties, massive destruction of the lives, land and property of the Vietnamese and a cruel dislocation of its traditional economy and social structure, we can turn our backs on Indochina, and absolve ourselves of any responsibility for its rebuilding. That experience, like the American Civil War, was too bloody and traumatic for us to forget; we must face it and ask ourselves what are the consequences for us.

We call upon the American people and their leaders to begin a national examination of conscience to make clear to all the extent of our responsibility for the suffering caused there by the prolongation of the conflict. In doing

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so, it would be useful if this committee were to compile and publish a summary of the physical and economic devastation in Vietnam. Some of the relevant facts that would be disclosed, verified or corrected include the following:

- 15.5 million tons of explosives used in Indochina (equivalent to one Hiroshima-size A-bomb every six days).
- 21 million bomb craters in South Vietnam alone.
- 6 million pounds of unexploded munitions scattered across fields and forests, posing a grave risk to farmers engaged in reclaiming their land.
- Physical destruction to buildings, cities, towns and rural villages.
- Between a third and one half of the population uprooted as a result of military action and area denial programs, destroying the traditional village culture and creating a vast urban refugee population.
- Dislocation of the economy: Vietnam, formerly a big rice exporter, became dependent on imports of foodstuffs supplied by AID; large numbers of people who became soldiers, policemen, government clerks, must relearn old skills or learn new ones.
- Countless thousands disabled by injuries caused by the war.

Such an appraisal—similar to surveys conducted after World War II in the occupied areas—would, if properly called to the attention of the American people, immediately be seen as a challenge to do much more than is contained in the pending bill. Therefore, this bill should be followed by bolder and more far-reaching measures, diplomatic and practical measures, of aid and reconstruction without which any talk of reconciliation between Americans, Vietnamese and Cambodians will remain empty words.

The churches and synagogues of this nation can be relied upon to convey this message of reconciliation to millions of Americans. But the people must act through the political process and the political leadership. That kind of collaboration will be made possible by this Committee's approval of this bill and recommendation of it to the whole House, thus taking the first step, but a necessary and significant one, in the collective task of reconciliation.

## Appendix

### RECONCILIATION AND RECONSTRUCTION OF POST-WAR INDOCHINA

Statement of the  
Interreligious Committee of General Secretaries  
December 2, 1975

The Catholic, Protestant and Jewish communities of America greeted with relief and happiness the news of the final silencing of guns and the end of the destruction in Indochina. Many of us have long decried the devastation which has been visited upon the land and people of Indochina during the past ten years.

in Saigon, Hanoi, Phnom Penh, and Vientiane, also, as the best way to regain their friendship, assure their independence and help satisfy unresolved problems of providing information on civilian and military personnel missing in action.

A national examination of conscience may be necessary to create the atmosphere for reconciliation. We encourage our constituents to recall the generous assistance of the United States to Germany, Japan and Italy after World War II. We encourage them to recognize that, to build peace and prevent war, communications must be available; whatever prohibits communication must be removed.

Specifically we propose that:

- 1) U.S. government restrictions on private aid shipments to Indochina be removed because they impede citizen action for alleviating suffering and for contributing to the social-economic reconstruction of Indochina.
- 2) the United States withdraw its veto against the seating of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the Republic of South Vietnam at the United Nations as a first step to opening communication with those countries with whom we must now establish peace.
- 3) negotiations for normalizing relations between the United States and the nations of Indochina begin at once.
- 4) while appropriate government aid for humanitarian and medical assistance and reconstruction should be negotiated by the Administration, and legislated by Congress, private efforts to heal the wounds of war by the religious community and private citizens be encouraged.

We seek the normalization of relations between our nations as soon as possible. To this end we urge that the trade embargo be lifted, that negotiations for appropriate massive government reconstructive relief begin, and until such aid is forthcoming, that the citizenry support private efforts for a people-to-people aid program for the victims of the war. This voluntary effort would contribute significantly to healing the wounds of the war.

Bishop James S. Rausch  
General Secretary  
United States Catholic Conference  
Dr. Clair Randall  
General Secretary  
National Council of Churches  
Rabbi Henry Siegman  
Executive Vice President  
Synagogue Council of America

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