‘Wilson, Johnson and British troops in Vietnam’

The Anglo-American ‘Special Relationship’ is perhaps the most famous bilateral relationship between two different respective countries. With the exception of two major anomalies, throughout the twentieth century Great Britain and the United States of America fought side by side in every major conflict the two countries found themselves directly engaged in. The 1965-73 Vietnam War for the United States and the 1982 Falklands War for the United Kingdom are the only two major conflicts in which they did not. This paper will attempt to assess the evidence to better understand to what extent the British were influenced and interested in the Vietnam War and why the United Kingdom resisted American calls for British troops in Vietnam.

Despite never being a part of the British Empire, and never playing a significant role in British imperial history up to 1945, the countries that make up Indochina became hugely important to the British after the Second World War. Broadly speaking, the British governments reaction to the ongoing conflicts in Vietnam was divided and confusing. However, there are four main areas where a British interest in Vietnam can be seen. These include socially, diplomatically, economically and finally militarily.

By the time of the American war in Vietnam, the war was no more popular than it had been when the French war was being fought, indeed it was even less so. In a Memorandum to President Johnson, it is understood that the Americans realised how unpopular the war was in the UK, and therefore it would be difficult for any party to advocate an increased British commitment in Vietnam.[i] This meant that even maintaining the fairly passive policy in regard to

Vietnam, meant that the left in the Labour Party were tabling a rebel bill in Parliament during 1965 to break British support of the American policies in Vietnam.[ii] At its peak, 58 of the 393 Labour MPs threatened to rebel against the Government which would have denied them a working majority to run the country.[iii] The British left wing, was particularly vocal in its opposition to the Vietnam War. In the British Communist Party Resolution on the Vietnam situation it is stated that the British Communist Party strongly objects to the American presence in Vietnam, which they feel violates the agreements previously made by the US and the Saigon administration.[iv] The British Communist Party felt that the United States must be made to respect the peace agreements and that the bombing campaign must cease immediately. The Party goes further and suggests the British Government should recognise the National Liberation Front or Viet Cong Government as the legitimate South Vietnamese Government.[v] The Party also reluctantly understood that it was a fringe party at the time, and therefore it must try to influence the Labour Party and the progressive movement in Britain as a whole.[vi] However, whilst the majority of the British people were against intervention, there were still people who felt that the Communists were also in the wrong. Sir Robert Thompson, a noted British expert on Vietnam, decried how the atrocities committed by the Communists have occurred on a scale which makes casualties from the bombing of the North almost insignificant by comparison. Thompson wrote about how the Communists had committed war crimes which "… have occurred, both selectively and discriminately, as a matter of deliberate policy."[vii]

Diplomatically speaking, is perhaps where the most obvious evidence of British interest and influence into the Vietnam wars can be seen. First and foremost, since 1963 the British Government had decided that the best way to achieve a good outcome from the situation in Vietnam, was a negotiated peace settlement with compromise on both sides. To this end the

official British position supported the US bombing campaign on the grounds that the North Vietnamese Government had refused to respond to repeated American offers to negotiate.[viii] Furthermore, the British Government did not give up, and eventually tried to get the Soviet Government to intervene and use their influence to try and persuade the North Vietnamese Government to put aside their differences and come to the negotiating table.[ix]

One reoccurring theme that is prevalent throughout the period is the fact that the British Government was keen to boost its neutral credentials to obtain peace. Wilson would go on to state he wished to be seen as an honest broker between East and West, much to the annoyance of President Johnson.[x] This was particularly frustrating because the former Conservative Prime Minister Sir Alexander Douglas-Home had encouraged the idea of an escalation in Vietnam in private conversation.[xi] In another memorandum to President Johnson, it is stated that President Johnson was very sceptical at his advisor's insistence that the British were very useful in Vietnam.[xii] His advisors made the case that whilst a Conservative Government would be easier to persuade, a Labour Government approval would mean more internationally. For this reason, and that the UK was trustworthy, it was recommended that the US continue to keep the UK informed on its Vietnam policy.[xiii] Moreover, the British should continue to try and talk to the Soviet Union, in order to get them to use their influence on North Vietnam to obtain peace in Southeast Asia. However, the Soviets claimed there could not be peace when the Americans were not serious about an honest peace agreement due to their bombing of the North.[xiv]

Another diplomatic concern of the British, particularly the Wilson Government was to be seen as sovereign and not merely a puppet of the United States. Just two years after he was first elected journalistic speculation was rife that Wilson had sold his soul to President Johnson.[xv] Therefore, this made Wilson deem it necessary to make the remark in 1966 that the UK is "more

useful to you, as well as to the world, as an ally rather than as a satellite."[xvi] The British were also concerned that by being too belligerent in regards to Vietnam, it might encourage the Chinese to invade the prosperous colony of Hong Kong, something the Government did not want to lose.[xvii]

However, the idea that Wilson was merely a puppet of President Johnson could not be further from the truth, as the personal relationship between the two leaders was particularly strained. When Wilson first came to power in 1964, elements within the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) were concerned that Wilson was a "Soviet Asset".[xviii] Although, there is no archival indication that either the President or his White House advisors took such stories very seriously or allowed their existence to impinge on their handling of Wilson.[xix] This 'red scare' continued and in a CIA intelligence report, it was reported that "The attitude of the left wing of the Labour Party toward the Vietnam crisis is infuriating."[xx] The report went further and suggested that a substantial element of the Labour Party had been infiltrated by Communists, citing that William Warbey and 60-70 other Labour MPs were Communist due to their visits to North Vietnam and their staunch opposition to the American war.[xxi]

On the other side though, there is also much to suggest that Britain had a strong relationship with the US. Indeed, it was reported that "The firmest public support from *any* government on our policy in Vietnam has come from the British. This, despite the fact that Vietnam is a difficult issue for any British Government, and especially a Labour Government."[xxii] For his part, Wilson was willing to support the US in Vietnam with words, with help on intelligence, with (sometimes disguised) arms sales, with mediation to Moscow, even with clandestine counterinsurgency expertise.[xxiii] However, Wilson was above all determined to avoid an open commitment of troops. On several occasions between 1965 and 1966 Wilson out

rightly refused to despatch even a symbolic "platoon of bagpipers" or Gurkhas to Vietnam.[xxiv] Therefore, the vast majority of information suggests that behind the smiling faces, serious problems existed. During one heated exchange in 1967, it is reported that American advisor Walt Rostow commented that "Well, we don't give a goddam about you and we don't give a goddam about Wilson."[xxv] Moreover, President Johnson felt an intermittent personal annoyance with both Wilson and what he saw as the instinctual Anglophilia of the American foreign policy leadership. Having won the American election by preaching against discrimination in the United States, he was not about to preach pro-British discrimination in international affairs.[xxvi] In 1966, the US Embassy in London even asked bluntly: "Are we overestimating the importance to us of the British?"[xxvii] The US strategic bombing was another area that caused divisions. When Wilson dissociated themselves from the May-June 1966 bombing of Hanoi and Haiphong, and promised that arms sales to the US and Australia for use in Vietnam would be suspended, they felt the full blast of President Johnson's temper.[xxviii] By 1968 many factors including the 1967 devaluation, Wilson's non-commitment of troops to Vietnam, British cutbacks East of Suez, and the bitter dispute over offsetting costs to Great Britain for its troops in West Germany had all combined to cause serious rifts between London and Washington.[xxix]

Another crucial reason the British did not invest too deeply was that of economic concerns. By 1964, Britain was overstretched militarily, its economy was sluggish and uncompetitive, and it had accumulated a severe balance of payments deficit. Moreover, it had acquired a £800 million debt, had extensive overseas commitments and a currency subject to speculative attacks. This meant that the government at the time found the economy to be a more pressing concern than engaging into an expensive, unpopular and unwinnable war in the far east.[xxx] The United States seriously discussed the idea of bailing the British economy out for

three reasons. Firstly, the US did not want the British to devalue its currency or let it collapse. US Treasury Secretary Fowler advised President Johnson that "A collapsed Pound would have very serious consequences for the United States, its entire foreign policy, and the continued stability of the free world financial system."[xxxi] Secondly, the US felt it could use its strong economic power to 'buy' British troops in Vietnam under what was termed 'the Hessian option'. This often-included strong arming the British, and telling them they could not support the British economy unless Britain was prepared to put its flag in South Vietnam.[xxxii] However, ultimately President Johnson chose to ignore his advisors and chose to keep the two areas separate.[xxxiii] The third reason the US was considering bailing out the British economy was due to a desire to share the military burden elsewhere. The US did not want the UK to be making serious budget cuts to the military outside of Vietnam. Particularly in Asia and West Germany, where the British Army of the Rhine was permanently stationed. This was very expensive to maintain but equally crucial in maintaining the balance of power with the Warsaw Pact in Europe.[xxxiv] Ultimately, Wilson chose to reject these excessive demands for an American Sterling rescue in 1967 to an extent. Whilst, Wilson did choose to in effect devalue the currency to assert British sovereignty, he choose to maintain its commitments to NATO and broadly endorsed the American position in Vietnam, without sending British troops directly.[xxxv]

On the other hand, militarily speaking, the British maintained a strong interest in the American war in Vietnam. From the beginning Wilson was prepared to dispatch military advisors to the South Vietnamese, American and Australian forces to try and teach them the lessons learnt from the British experience in Malaya previously. This included the BRIAM or British Advisory Mission to Vietnam led by Sir Robert Thompson, who had been instrumental in the success in Malaya.[xxxvi] This included the creation of the 'Delta Plan' which was a British

model based on the 'Briggs Plan' of Malaya but remodelled for Vietnam. However, this would be rejected in favour of the American 'Strategic Hamlets' policy, which was in itself based on the British Malaya experience.[xxxvii] The possibility of sending more advisors to Vietnam instead of actual ground troops was seriously considered by the British Government. In a memorandum from advisor McGeorge Bundy to President Johnson, he mentions to Johnson that allowing the British to increase their advisors might be the most realistic option for the US considering how unpopular the war was in the UK.[xxxviii] This is also reflected in an inward cablegram from the Australian High Commission in London, which suggested that the British were endeavouring to recruit more advisors and experts in different fields.[xxxix]

The British were keen to also learn from the American, South Vietnamese and Australian experience in Vietnam. Therefore, the British Colonel T.G. Williams was sent to South Vietnam to shadow the three different armies and see what lessons could be learnt. Williams was particularly interested in how armoured warfare was being conducted by the three different nations.[xl] During his time in Vietnam, Williams was especially impressed with the way airpower, tanks and RPGs (Rocket Propelled Grenades) were being used. To the extent that he wrote a summary of his time and recommended the British army seriously consider the lessons he had found.[xli] Williams also made the point that it was important to stress that Vietnam and Malaya are not the same, and it would be wrong to totally consider them so. Organisationally Williams found that the allies were particularly poor in four main areas. Firstly, he felt that not enough was being done to root out the Communists in their villages, towns and cities. Secondly, he felt that the US tour of duty system was poor and should be replaced with the Australian model whereby whole units toured in and out, rather than individuals. This he felt would improve morale and combat effectiveness. Thirdly, he felt that cooperation between the different sides was mostly

lacking, although he conceded that the Americans were better than the Australians in this regard. Finally, Williams felt that the press was given too much freedom. He felt that the war had become "too damn democratic" and hoped that it would never be repeated.[xlii]

In conclusion, the British attitude to the Vietnam wars were extremely complicated. Great Britain was always especially interested and influenced by the French war, but most especially in the American war in Vietnam. Whilst the Prime Minister was broadly interested in an intervention to some degree, he was always hampered by the growing unpopularity of the war and controlling the left wing within his party. Moreover, at the beginning of war, the British Government was led by the Labour Party under Harold Wilson, who was largely preoccupied with economic matters at home than getting involved in an expensive and unpopular war on the other side of the world. The British Government was far more partial to the idea of using their neutral credentials to try and obtain a true 'peace with honour' as early as 1964. However, when it became clear that this peace would not be immediately forthcoming, the British sought to make the most of the situation and provided limited aid though war material, intelligence, covert operations and the dispatch of a limited number of advisors. Additionally, the British were keen to learn what lessons could be learnt militarily from this war and so sent observers such as Colonel T.G. Williams to shadow the South Vietnamese, American and Australian forces in Vietnam. Harold Wilson's unique statesmanship in regard to trying to get an honourable peace during the Vietnam war, and balancing the concerns of his own party with that of Britain's closest ally, would become one of his most defining qualities.

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