

Appeal to the American Conscience

Bertrand Russell

Russell made this public appeal on 18 June 1966, and it was subsequently published in War Crimes in Vietnam, his little book which attracted some calumny when it appeared. Russell anticipated the formation of the Vietnam War Crimes Tribunal, inaugurated in London later the same year. His searing indictment expresses the passion he felt for a cause which had absorbed him for some years already, and came to characterise the Foundation during its early years.

I appeal to you, citizens of America, as a person concerned with liberty and social justice. Many of you will feel that your country has served these ideals and, indeed, the United States possesses a revolutionary tradition which, in its origins, was true to the struggle for human liberty and for social equality. It is this tradition which has been traduced by the few who rule the United States today. Many of you may not be fully aware of the extent to which your country is controlled by industrialists who depend for their power partly upon great economic holdings in all parts of the world. The United States today controls over sixty per cent of the world's natural resources, although it contains only six per cent of the world's population. The minerals and produce of vast areas of the planet are possessed by a handful of men. I ask you to consider the words of your own leaders, who sometimes reveal the exploitation they have practised. The *New York Times* of February 12, 1950 said:

‘Indo-China is a prize worth a large gamble. In the North are exportable tin, tungsten, manganese, coal, lumber and rice; rubber, tea, pepper and hides. Even before World War II Indo-China yielded dividends estimated at 300 million dollars per year.’

One year later, an adviser to the United States State Department said the following:

‘We have only partially exploited South-East Asia's resources. Nevertheless, South-East Asia supplied ninety per cent of the world's crude rubber, sixty per cent of its tin and eighty per cent of its copra and coconut oil. It has sizeable quantities of sugar, tea, coffee, tobacco, sisal, fruits, spices, natural resins and gums, petroleum, iron ore and bauxite.’

And in 1953, while the French were still in Vietnam fighting with American backing, President Eisenhower stated:

‘Now let us assume we lost Indo-China. If Indo-China goes, the tin and tungsten we so greatly value would cease coming. We are after the cheapest way to prevent the occurrence of something terrible—the loss of our ability to get what we want from the riches of the Indo-Chinese territory and from South-East Asia.’

This makes clear that the war in Vietnam is a war like that waged by the Germans in Eastern Europe. It is a war designed to protect the continued control over the wealth of the region by American capitalists. When we consider that the fantastic sums of money spent on armament are awarded in contracts to the industries on whose boards of directors sit the generals who demand the weapons, we can see that the military and large industry have formed an interlocking alliance for their own profit.

The truth is that the Vietnamese popular resistance is just like the American revolutionary resistance to the British, who controlled the economic and political life of the American colonies in the eighteenth century. Vietnamese resistance is like the resistance of the French Maquis, the Yugoslav partisans and the guerrillas of Norway and Denmark to the Nazi occupation. That is why a small peasant people is able to hold down a vast army of the most powerful industrial nation on earth.

I appeal to you to consider what has been done to the people of Vietnam by the United States’ Government. Can you, in your hearts, justify the use of poison chemicals and gas, the saturation bombing of the entire country with jelly-gasoline and phosphorus? Although the American Press lies about this, the documentary evidence concerning the nature of these gases and chemicals is overwhelming. They are poisonous and they are fatal. Napalm and phosphorus burn until the victim is reduced to a bubbling mass. The United States has also used weapons like the ‘lazy dog’, which is a bomb containing ten thousand slivers of razor-sharp steel. These razor darts slice to ribbons the villagers upon whom these weapons of sheer evil are constantly used. In one province of North Vietnam, the most densely populated, one hundred million slivers of razor-sharp steel have fallen in a period of thirteen months.

It is even more revealing and terrible that more Vietnamese died during the reign of Diem, from 1954 to 1960, than since 1960, when the Vietnamese partisans took up armed resistance to the American occupation in the South. What the papers have called the ‘Vietcong’ is, in fact, a broad alliance, like the popular fronts of Europe, including all political views

ranging from Catholics to Communists. The National Liberation Front has the most ardent support of the people and only the wilfully blind will fail to see this.

Do you know that eight million Vietnamese were placed in internment camps under conditions of forced labour, with barbed wire and armed patrols? Do you know that this was done on the direction of the United States Government and that torture and brutal murder were a continuous feature of life in these camps? Are you aware that the gases and chemicals which have been used for five years in Vietnam blind, paralyse, asphyxiate, cause convulsions and result in unbearable death?

Try to imagine what it would mean if an enemy were bombing the United States and occupied it for twelve years. How would you feel if a foreign power had saturated New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, St Louis, San Francisco and Miami with jelly-gasoline, phosphorus and lazy dogs? What would you do if an occupying army used these toxic gases and chemicals in every town and hamlet they entered? Can you really think that the American people would welcome so savage an aggressor? The fact is that everywhere in the world people have come to see the men who control the United States Government as brutal bullies, acting in their own economic interests and exterminating any people foolhardy enough to struggle against this naked exploitation and aggression.

When the United States began its war against the Vietnamese, after having paid for nearly all of the French war against the same people, the US Defence Department owned property valued at 160 billion dollars. This value has since doubled. The US Defence Department is the world's largest organization, owning thirty-two million acres in the United States and millions more in foreign countries. By now, more than seventy-five cents out of every hundred are spent on present wars and preparation for future war. Billions of dollars are placed in the pockets of the US military, thereby giving the Pentagon economic power affecting every facet of American life. Military assets in the United States are three times as great as the combined assets of US Steel, Metropolitan Life Insurance, American Telephone and Telegraph, General Motors and Standard Oil. The Defence Department employs three times the number of people working in all these great world corporations. The billions of dollars in military contracts are provided by the Pentagon and fulfilled by large industry. By 1960, 21 billion dollars were spent on military goods. Of this colossal sum, 7½ billion were divided amongst ten corporations and five corporations received nearly one billion dollars each. I ask you to consider carefully that in the executive offices of these corporations there are more than 1,400

retired army officers, including 261 generals and officers of flag rank. General Dynamics has 187 retired officers, 27 generals and admirals and the former Secretary of the Army on its payroll. This is a ruling caste, which stays in power no matter who is elected to nominal public office, and every President finds himself obliged to serve the interests of this all-powerful group. Thus, American democracy has been emptied of life and meaning because the people cannot remove the real men who rule them.

It is this concentration of power which makes it necessary for the Pentagon and big industry to continue the arms race for its own sake. The sub-contracts they award to smaller industries and war contractors involve every American city and, thus, affect the jobs of millions of people. Four million work for the Defence Department. Its payroll is twelve billion dollars, twice that of the US automobile industry. A further four million work directly in arms industries. In many cities military production accounts for as much as eighty per cent of all manufacturing jobs. Over fifty per cent of the gross national product of the United States is devoted to military spending. This vast military system covers the world with over 3,000 military bases, for the simple purpose of protecting the same empire which was described so clearly in the statements of President Eisenhower, the State Department adviser and the *New York Times* which I mentioned earlier to you. From Vietnam to the Dominican Republic, from the Middle East to the Congo, the economic interests of a few big corporations linked to the arms industry and the military itself determine what happens to American lives. It is on their orders that the United States invades and oppresses starving and helpless people.

Yet, despite the immense wealth of the United States, despite the fact that with only six per cent of the world's people, approaching two-thirds of the world's resources are in its possession, despite the control over the world's oil, cobalt, tungsten, iron ore, rubber and other vital resources, despite the vast billions of profits that are gained by a few American corporations at the cost of mass starvation amongst the peoples of the world, despite all this, sixty-six million Americans live at poverty level. The cities of America are covered in slums. The poor carry the burden of taxation and the fighting of colonial and aggressive wars. I am asking all of you to make an intellectual connection between events which occur daily around you, to try to see clearly the system which has taken control of the United States and perverted its institutional life into a grotesque arsenal for a world empire. It is the vast military machine, the great industrial combines and their intelligence agencies which are regarded by the people of three whole continents as their main enemy in life and the

source of their misery and hunger. If we examine the governments which depend for their existence upon American military force, we shall always find regimes which support the rich, the landlords and the big capitalists. This is true in Brazil, in Peru, in Venezuela, in Thailand, in South Korea, in Japan. It is true the world over.

The result of this is that in order to suppress a national revolution, such as the great historic uprising of the Vietnamese people, the United States is obliged to behave as the Japanese behaved in South-East Asia and the Nazis behaved in Eastern Europe. This is literally true. The concentration camps to which I have referred, and which held nearly sixty per cent of the rural population of South Vietnam, were scenes of torture, massacre and mass burial. The special experimental weapons, like the gas and chemicals and jelly-gasoline, are as horrible as anything used by the Nazis during the Second World War. It is true that the Nazis systematically exterminated the Jews and the United States has not yet done anything comparable in Vietnam. With the exception of the extermination of the Jews, however, everything that the Germans did in Eastern Europe has been repeated by the United States in Vietnam on a scale which is larger and with an efficiency which is more terrible and more complete.

In violation of solemn international agreements signed by American Presidents and ratified by the American Congress, this Johnson Government has committed war crimes, crimes against humanity and crimes against the peace. It has committed these crimes because the Johnson Government exists to preserve the economic exploitation and the military domination of subject peoples by US industrial magnates and their military arm. The Central Intelligence Agency, which has a budget fifteen times larger than all the diplomatic activity of the United States, is involved in the assassination of heads of state, and plots against independent governments. This sinister activity is designed to destroy the leadership and the organization of peoples who are struggling to free themselves from the stranglehold of American economic and political domination. United States' militarism is inseparable from that same predatory capitalism which reduced the American people themselves to poverty within the living memory of this generation. The same essential motives have led to barbarous and atrocious crimes on a great scale in Vietnam.

I have called on intellectuals and eminent independent men and women from all parts of the world to join in an international War Crimes Tribunal which will hear evidence concerning the crimes of the US Government in Vietnam. You will remember that Germans were considered guilty if they

acquiesced in and accepted the crimes of their government. Nobody considered it a sufficient excuse for Germans to say that they knew about the gas chambers and the concentration camps, the torture and the mutilation, but were unable to stop it. I appeal to you as a human being to human beings. Remember your humanity and your own self-respect. The war against the people of Vietnam is barbaric. It is an aggressive war of conquest.

During the American War of Independence, no one had to tell Americans the purpose of their struggle or conscript them against their will. Nor was it necessary for American soldiers to go ten thousand miles to another country. In the American revolutionary war against foreign troops Americans fought in fields and forests although they were in rags and the occupying army was the strongest of the day. Americans fought the occupier, although they were hungry and poor, and they fought them house by house. In that war of liberation, the American revolutionaries were called terrorists and the colonial power was the one labelling them rebels and rabble. American national heroes responded with words such as Nathan Hale's and Patrick Henry's. The sentiment, 'Give me liberty or give me death', inspired their struggle, just as it inspires the Vietnamese resistance to United States' aggression and occupation.

The Nathan Hales and Patrick Henrys of Vietnam are not the United States army. Those who display heroism, love of country and that deep belief in freedom and justice which inspired the American people in 1776 are today the people of Vietnam, fighting under the revolutionary leadership of their National Liberation Front. And so the American people are to be used as cannon-fodder by those who exploit not only the Vietnamese but the people of the United States themselves. It is Americans who have been killing Vietnamese, attacking villages, occupying cities, using gas and chemicals, bombing their schools and hospitals—all this to protect the profits of American capitalism. The men who conscript the soldiers are the same men who sign the military contracts in their own benefit. They are the same men who send American soldiers to Vietnam as company cops, protecting stolen property.

So it is that the real struggle for freedom and democracy is inside the United States itself, against the usurpers of American society. I have no doubt that the American people would respond just as the Vietnamese have responded if the United States were invaded and subjected to the atrocities and tortures which the United States army and Government have inflicted on the Vietnamese. The American protest movement, which has inspired people all over the world, is the only true spokesman for American concern

for individual liberty and social justice. The battle-front for freedom is in Washington, in the struggle against the war criminals—Johnson, Rusk and McNamara—who have degraded the United States and its citizens. Indeed, they have stolen the United States from its people and made the name of a great country stink in the nostrils of people the world over. This is the harsh truth, and it is a truth which is affecting the daily lives of Americans irrevocably and increasingly. There is no looking the other way. There is no pretending that the war crimes are not occurring, that the gas and chemicals do not exist, that the torture and napalm have not been used, that the Vietnamese have not been slaughtered by American soldiers and American bombs. There is no dignity without the courage to examine this evil and oppose it. There is no solution for the American crisis short of the emancipation of the American people themselves from these barbarous men who speak in their name and defile a great people by doing so. The American people, however, are becoming alert and are showing the same determination and courage which the Vietnamese have so movingly displayed. The Negro struggle in Harlem, Watts and the American South, the resistance of the American students, the increasing distaste for this war shown by the American people at large, give hope to all mankind that the day when greedy and brutal men can deceive and abuse the American nation is drawing to a close.

My appeal to Americans is made with full awareness that the rulers of the United States have spared no device in propaganda to hide from the American people the ugly face of their rulers and the truth about their behaviour. Abraham Lincoln gave expression to the hope that a people, once aroused, can be deceived no longer. All Americans who know from their own experience and from that of their closest relatives what has been done in Vietnam should come forward now. Speak the truth and take your stand alongside your brothers throughout the world. Struggle for an America free of murderous production, free of war criminals, free of exploitation and free of the hatred of subject peoples. These peoples look to the ordinary people of the United States to understand their plight and to answer their struggle with an American resistance capable of making the United States again a citadel of individual liberty and social justice. The international War Crimes Tribunal is itself an appeal to the conscience of the American people, our allies in a common cause.

The War Crimes Tribunal is under urgent preparation now. I am approaching eminent jurists, literary figures and men of public affairs in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the United States itself. Vietnamese victims of this war will give evidence. Full scientific data concerning the

chemicals used, their properties and their effects will be documented. Eyewitnesses will describe what they have seen and scientists will be invited to examine the exhibits in the possession of the Tribunal. The proceedings will be tape-recorded and the full evidence will be published. There will be documentary film material concerning the witnesses and their evidence. We aim to provide the most exhaustive portrayal of what has happened to the people of Vietnam. We intend that the peoples of the world shall be aroused as never before, the better to prevent the repetition of this tragedy elsewhere. Just as in the case of Spain, Vietnam is a barbarous rehearsal. It is our intention that neither the bona fides nor the authenticity of this Tribunal will be susceptible to challenge from those who have so much to hide. President Johnson, Dean Rusk, Robert McNamara, Henry Cabot Lodge, General Westmoreland and their fellow criminals will be brought before a wider justice than they recognize and a more profound condemnation than they are equipped to understand.