

Module 10: How Will Historians Treat Richard Nixon?

Evidence 19: Domino Theory: A Conversation With the President on Foreign Policy, July 1, 1970

A

Question to Consider

- How does the evidence below refute or support the views of the three historians outlined in the Conclusion to this module?

Document

MR. SEVAREID. Mr. President, you have said that self-determination in South Vietnam is really our aim, and all we can ask for. The Vice President says a non-Communist future for Indochina, or Southeast Asia. His statement seems to enlarge the ultimate American aim considerably. Have we misunderstood you or has he or what is the aim?

THE PRESIDENT. Mr. Sevareid, when the Vice President refers to a non-Communist Southeast Asia that would mean of course, a non-Communist South Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. That is the area we usually think of as Southeast Asia. This is certainly something that I think most Americans and most of those in free Asia and most of those in the free world would think would be a desirable goal. Let me put it another way: I do not think it would be in the interest of the United States and those who want peace in the Pacific if that part of the world should become Communist, because then the peace of the world, the peace in the Pacific, would be in my opinion very greatly jeopardized if the Communists were to go through that area. However, referring now specifically to what we are doing in Vietnam, our aim there is a very limited one, and it is to provide for the South Vietnamese the right of self-determination. I believe that when they exercise that right they will choose a non-Communist government. But we are indicating--and incidentally, despite what everybody says about the present government in South Vietnam, its inadequacies and the rest, we have to give them credit for the fact that they also have indicated that they will accept the result of an election, what the people choose. Let us note the fact that the North Vietnamese are in power not as a result of an election, and have refused to

indicate that they will accept the result of an election in South Vietnam, which would seem to me to be a pretty good bargaining point on our side.

MR. CHANCELLOR. Mr. President, I am a little confused at this point because you seem in vivid terms to be describing South Vietnam as the first of the string of dominoes that could topple in that part of the world and turn it into a Communist part of the world, in simple terms. Are you saying that we cannot survive, we cannot allow a regime or a government in South Vietnam to be constructed that would, say, lean toward the Communist bloc? What about a sort of Yugoslavia? Is there any possibility of that kind of settlement?

THE PRESIDENT. Mr. Chancellor, it depends upon the people of South Vietnam. If the people of South Vietnam after they see what the Vietcong, the Communist Vietcong, have done to the villages they have occupied, the 40,000 people that they have murdered, village chiefs and others, the atrocities of Hue--if the people of South Vietnam, of which 850,000 of them are Catholic refugees from North Vietnam, after a blood bath there when the North Vietnamese took over in North Vietnam---if the people of South Vietnam under those circumstances should choose to move in the direction of a Communist government, that, of course, is their right. I do not think it will happen. But I do emphasize that the American position and the position also of the present Government of South Vietnam, it seems to me, is especially strong, because we are confident enough that we say to the enemy, "All right, we'll put our case to the people and we'll accept the result." If it happens to be what you describe, a Yugoslav type of government or a mixed government, we will accept it.

MR. CHANCELLOR. What I am getting at, sir, is, if you say on the one hand that Vietnam--South Vietnam is the first of the row of dominoes which we cannot allow to topple, then can you say equally, at the same time, that we will accept the judgment of the people of South Vietnam if they choose a Communist government?

THE PRESIDENT. The point that you make, Mr. Chancellor, is one that we in the free world face every place in the world, and it is really what distinguishes us from the Communist world. Again, I know that what is called cold war rhetoric isn't fashionable these days, and I am not engaging in it because I am quite practical, and we must be quite practical, about the

world in which we live with all the dangers that we have in the Mideast and other areas that I am sure we will be discussing later in this program. But let us understand that we in the free world have to live or die by the proposition that the people have a right to choose. Let it also be noted that in no country in the world today in which the Communists are in power have they come to power as a result of the people choosing them--not in North Vietnam, not in North Korea, not in China, not in Russia, and not in any one of the countries of Eastern Europe, and not in Cuba. In every case, communism has come to power by other than a free election, so I think we are in a pretty safe position on this particular point. I think you are therefore putting, and I don't say this critically, what is really a hypothetical question. It could happen. But if it does happen that way we must assume the consequences, and if the people of South Vietnam should choose a Communist government, then we will have to accept the consequences of what would happen as far as the domino theory in the other areas.

MR. CHANCELLOR. In other words, live with it?

THE PRESIDENT. We would have to live with it, and I would also suggest this: When we talk about the dominoes, I am not saying that automatically if South Vietnam should go the others topple one by one. I am only saying that in talking to every one of the Asian leaders, and I have talked to all of them. I have talked to Lee Kuan Yew--all of you know him from Singapore of course--and to the Tunku from Malaysia, the little countries, and to Suharto from Indonesia, and of course to Thanom and Thanat Khoman, the two major leaders in Thailand--I have talked to all of these leaders and every one of them to a man recognizes, and Sato of Japan recognizes, and of course the Koreans recognize that if the Communists succeed, not as a result of a free election--they are not thinking of that but if they succeed as a result of exporting aggression and supporting it in toppling the government, then the message to them is, "Watch out, we might be next." That's what is real. So, if they come in as a result of a free election, and I don't think that is going to happen, the domino effect would not be as great.

Source: Obtained courtesy of John Woolley and Gerhard Peters at The American Presidency Project, University of California at Santa Barbara, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>.