

IN THE UNITED STATES: GROWING MOVEMENT OF SUPPORT FOR VIET NAM

The Guardian and the antiwar movement

By RANDY FURST
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(Third of a series)

The previous articles in this series on the political crisis in the *Guardian* staff appeared May 1 and 8. The series was suspended for lack of space during the post-Cambodia events. Randy Furst was a principal *Guardian* staff writer until fired in April for his political views after joining the Young Socialist Alliance. Harry Ring has followed the political evolution of the *Guardian* since its inception in 1948. The last article in the series dealt with the *Guardian's* attitude toward the antiwar movement in the period prior to August 1969. Copies are available on request from our business office.

During the period of several years when SDS and assorted ultraleft groupings stubbornly refused to help build mass actions against the Vietnam war, the *Guardian* also joined in counterposing to such mass actions the notion of "disruptions" and "confrontations" by small but "militant" groupings. The result, the *Guardian* insisted, would be to promote mass "anti-imperialist consciousness."

Then, in an Aug. 2, 1969, editorial, the *Guardian* did a political somersault.

The editorial announced that the radical movement had a political responsibility to "build a massive and powerful united movement for the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of U. S. forces from Vietnam."

To help accomplish this, the *Guardian* editors modestly offered to "elucidate a few of the mistakes the movement, including ourselves, have made in this area in the past."

The editorial quite cogently observed that it had been a mistake to attack "certain actions because they were 'just against the war, and not anti-imperialist.'"

"The way we see it at this point," the *Guardian* editors stated, "is that any action demanding the immediate withdrawal of troops from Vietnam is objectively anti-imperialist, even if its participants have only liberal or pacifist intentions."

Antiwar activists including supporters of *The Militant* who had been fighting for this approach were naturally pleased with the *Guardian's* shift. Curiously, however, the editorial gave absolutely no indication as to why or how the *Guardian* editors had changed their minds on so pivotal an issue.

It is always good to rectify a mis-

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For a time, *Guardian* editors deferred to Vietnamese who have consistently pointed to mass demonstrations as most effective approach for antiwar move-

ment. Above photos of mass antiwar demonstrations appeared in March 1969 issue of Vietnamese publication, Vietnam.

taken political position. But if there is no attempt at a serious examination of why the mistake was made, or no clear motivation offered for the rectification, the correction can easily prove to be more apparent than real. This turned out to be the case with the *Guardian* switch on the antiwar issue.

Vietnamese perspective

Several weeks after the editorial appeared, it became clear that the change in line was not the result of any serious rethinking, but an act of deference to the very realistic and correct approach to the Vietnamese themselves.

In a series of articles by a leading staff member, Carl Davidson, which began in the Aug. 30, 1969, *Guardian*, readers were informed of a July meeting in Havana between a group of some 30 U. S. radicals, including Davidson, and representatives of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.

In the first article, Davidson spelled out the view of the Vietnamese on the war. He said that "what the Vietnamese believed could play an almost decisive role in bringing the war to an early end at this point is the antiwar movement in the U. S."

"The Vietnamese," Davidson reported, "were well aware that more Americans than ever opposed the war, but were curious as to why the massive antiwar mobilizations had gone downhill since the spring of 1967."

"They understood the differences between and among the liberals and the radicals but asked, pointedly, why they could not unite around the demand for the immediate withdrawal of U. S. troops."

"The message," Davidson announced, "was clear: Now, more than ever, Vietnam must be a central issue taken to the American people."

But while the message was clear, the *Guardian's* subsequent stands and activities made it fairly plain that, while they were deferring to the judgement of the Vietnamese, they didn't really understand or accept it politically.

Even while giving formal support to the idea that the best way to defend the Vietnamese revolution (not to speak of the interests of the vast majority of the American people) was to organize mass, united actions for withdrawal, the *Guardian* continued to believe that such activity ran counter to their perspective of carving out some kind of a new political movement by injecting an undefined "anti-imperialist consciousness" into the antiwar movement.

The only difference was that, while they still mistakenly thought there was a contradiction between developing radical consciousness and building the

antiwar movement, now they decided it was necessary to subordinate the consciousness-raising process to the mass antiwar actions as a means of helping the Vietnamese.

Teetering

Three weeks later, the *Guardian* was already on the edge of the wagon into which it had climbed with such good resolution. In an Aug. 23, 1969, editorial deploring an ultraleft attack on the platform of a united antiwar rally in New York, the paper wound up agreeing with the central political point of the ultralefts.

"Immediate withdrawal is sufficient to build a big movement," the *Guardian* opined, "but it cannot build a lasting movement. It is in this area—in agitating for a broad yet more radical antiwar movement, based on anti-imperialist politics—that the left can play an especially useful role."

Two months later, the *Guardian* had fallen off the wagon completely. An Oct. 25, 1969, editorial reviewed the outcome of the Oct. 15 Moratorium and anticipated the Nov. 15 New Mobilization demonstration in Washington. By now the *Guardian* seemed to have forgotten completely the estimate offered in August that mass demonstrations for immediate withdrawal were well worth supporting as objectively anti-imperialist.

Indicating no comprehension of the profound significance of the unprecedented grass-roots outpouring for the Moratorium, the editors expressed the hope that Nov. 15 would produce "a greater, more militant and radical impact than the Moratorium. To accomplish this, however, it is necessary not only to bring out hundreds of thousands of people, but to establish a clear political distinction between the compromised liberalism of the Moratorium and what must become a clear anti-imperialist perspective Nov. 15. . . . In the absence of confrontation—none is planned—it is extremely important that the slogans of the demonstration be radical."

Agreeing that the "main slogan" should be immediate withdrawal, the *Guardian* insisted that the New Mobilization, then a broad coalition, must also officially project such slogans as support to the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam and also concentrate "on such issues as racism, poverty and other contradictions in American society."

In short—as it was saying prior to its short-lived, fainthearted conversion to mass action—the *Guardian* was attempting to narrow down the coalition by imposing on it a multi-issue radical political program.

Nor did the *Guardian* limit itself to ultimatic editorial declarations. At the end of 1969, *Guardian* general

manager Irving Beinin was in the forefront of a liberal-ultraleft hodgepodge which combined to strip the New Mobe of its coalition character. The Mobe was successfully reduced to an ineffectual assortment of contending cliques held together only by their common opposition to mass actions against the war.

Post-Cambodia

Since the great upheaval touched off by Cambodia, Kent, Augusta and Jackson the *Guardian* editorials have made a partial switch in emphasis, speaking once again of the need for left unity in opposing the war.

But the switch is more illusory than real. In three editorials that have appeared since Cambodia, there is literally not a single mention of mass demonstrations—either pro or con—and there is no indication of attitude toward the very significant development of antiwar universities. (One news article, in passing, indicated hostility to the development.)

For example, the May 23 *Guardian* featured an analysis of the antiwar movement by Carl Davidson. It included this not unperceptive observation:

"In the past, where a section of the youth movement thought mass demonstrations were passe and called for more militant confrontations, now a large number at the May 9 Washington action felt it was passe too. The difference was that they believed the 'more radical' thing to do was to get back to their local areas to help elect liberal candidates. What is interesting is that both these views—right and 'left'—complement each other in denying the primary tactical necessity of nationally coordinated united-front mass actions for the immediate withdrawal of U. S. troops from Indochina."

Well and good. But a week later at a New Mobe steering committee meeting in Atlanta, *Guardian* spokesman Irving Beinin was enthusiastically helping to re-cement the liberal-ultraleft, anti-mass-action bloc.

In voting for the projected alternative to such mass action—civil disobedience and "direct action"—Beinin offered a bit of tactical advice.

Today, he solemnly intoned, masses of Americans are "ready for action." Therefore, he explained, there's no need to talk about "riots" and "direct action." "You just do it."

But this is not particularly surprising. While at one point or another the *Guardian* may seek to defer to the Vietnamese by paying lip service to the need for mass antiwar actions, its spokesman within the antiwar movement has consistently allied himself with those forces most stubbornly opposed to building such mass actions.