Indochina Monographs

The South Vietnamese Society

Maj. Gen. Nguyen Duy Hinh and
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U. S. ARMY CENTER OF MILITARY HISTORY
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Colonel William E. Le Gro, U.S. Army, retired, has written a forthcoming work allied with this series, Vietnam: From Cease-Fire to Capitulation. Another book, The Final Collapse by General Cao Van Vien, the last chairman of the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff, will be formally published and sold by the Superintendent of Documents.

Taken together these works should provide useful source materials for serious historians pending publication of the more definitive series, the U.S. Army in Vietnam.

JAMES L. COLLINS, JR.
Brigadier General, USA
Chief of Military History

Preface

During the Vietnam conflict, the long and destructive war, Communist subversion, an unstable economy, several changes in government and the extended presence of Free World Military Forces combined to accentuate the basic weaknesses of South Vietnamese society: divisiveness and infighting.

To evaluate the effect that South Vietnamese society had on the conduct of the war, this monograph seeks to present the Vietnamese point of view on the joint U.S.-RVN efforts to build a strong and viable South Vietnam, the impact of U.S. aid and the American presence on the South Vietnamese society, the most significant social problems that South Vietnam faced during and as a result of the war, and finally the viability of the U.S.-supported regime and its leadership.

To provide this in-depth analysis we, the authors, have drawn primarily on our own experience as major witnesses of South Vietnam's politico-social tragedy and participants in the war effort. Constructed from the combined vantage points of our positions, one in the field and exposed to the rural scene and the other in the very heart of the urban mainstream, this work thoroughly reflects the insider's viewpoint and internate knowledge of South Vietnamese political and social life.

In the preparation of this monograph, we have interviewed several prominent South Vietnamese political and social leaders presently in the United States. Because of their insistence on anonimity, we think it proper to acknowledge their goodwill through a collective, impersonal expression of thanks. Additionally, we owe a special debt of gratitude to General Cao Van Vien, Chief of the Joint General Staff, JGS, Lieute-

tenant General Dong Van Khuyen, Chief of Staff, JGS, Lieutenant General Ngo Quang Truong, Commanding General, I Corps and MR-1, and Colonel Hoang Ngoc Lung, Assistant Chief of Staff J-2, JGS for their valuable guidance, perceptive remarks, and constructive suggestions.

Finally, I am particularly indebted to Lieutenant Colonel Chu Xuan Vien and Ms. Pham Thi Bong. Lt. Colonel Vien, the last Army Attache serving at the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, D.C., has done a highly professional job of translating and editing that helps impart unity and cohesiveness to the manuscript. Ms. Bong, a former Captain in the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces and also a former member of the Vietnamese Embassy staff, spent long hours typing, editing and in the administrative preparation of this monograph in final form.

McLean, Virginia
15 December 1978

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CHAPTER I

The Vietnamese Heritage

Ancient Vietnamese Society and the Chinese Influence

Vietnamese have always prided themselves as a people with four thousand years of civilization, two thousand of which is steeped in legends and the remaining enlightened by recorded history. Chinese historians wrote profusely about the Vietnamese people. One of their works, *Viet Tuyen Thu* (A Treatise on the Viets), described our people in these words: "The Viets are disdainful, belligerent, astute in military matters, and not afraid to die. They live in the mountains yet move about on water, using boats as vehicles and oars as horses. When they come, it is like a gentle breeze; when they go, it is hard to catch up with them."[1]

Chinese emperors of every dynasty had always wanted to assimilate the Vietnamese by subjugation and domination. The first period of Chinese rule extended for more than ten centuries, from 111 B.C. to A.D. 968, the year the Vietnamese regained their sovereignty. During this long period, which was highlighted by five uprisings of Vietnamese patriots, what surprised historians the most was not the deep Chinese influence on the Vietnamese but their ability to resist complete sinicization.

It was not that China had no serious design to assimilate the Viets. The fact was that after the first uprising had been put down in A.D. 40-43, the Chinese compelled Vietnamese to wear their clothes

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[1]This book was written during the Han Dynasty, after their conquest of Vietnam that lasted from circa 100 B.C. to circa A.D. 102.

and hair in the Chinese-style, live the Chinese way of life, and pattern their village administration after the Chinese model. Despite this, the Vietnamese retained their identity and certain cultural traits of their own. These traits were found to be more accentuated in the masses than among the affluent bourgeoisie.

During the initial period of Chinese domination, the Vietnamese were still in a semi-civilized state. The Chinese brought their culture, philosophy, and literature into Vietnam not so much to "civilize" the Vietnamese as to facilitate and perpetuate their rule. This process of acculturation continued to expand as many generations of lettered and prominent Chinese subsequently took refuge in Vietnam as a result of civil strife and disturbances in their homeland.

The most profound Chinese influence on traditional Vietnamese society was perhaps Confucianism. The practice of Confucianism, which was founded by Confucius 500 years before the birth of Christ and later propagated by his nephew Mencius, was known as the Confucian-Mencian Way. Through the ages, Confucian-Mencian philosophy so thoroughly permeated Vietnamese politics, ethics, sociology, and even economics that it could be said to be the Vietnamese nation's religion from its birth to the beginning of French rule in 1883. Confucius's teachings were founded on the concept of natural law, which, in practical terms, translated into social order and social rules. Confucianism conceived of a nation as being one extended family in which the emperor was the father and the subjects his children. The personal morality of the ruler was of utmost importance since it exerted an encompassing influence on the people. Confucius said, "The ruler is like the wind and the commoners the grass blades. When the wind blows, the grass blades have to bend under it."

In his study of Confucianism, Pham Quynh, a Vietnamese scholar in the early 30's asserted: "Our society has two great classes, the common people who are rural peasants and the educated or (Confucianist) scholars. The commoners, always submissive and unenvious, look upon the scholars as teachers and guides. The scholars accept this responsibility obligingly

and without arrogance; they consider themselves the missionaries of the Confucian-Mencian Way."[2]

The traditional social hierarchy depicted by Pham Quynh survived through generations and remained immutable until recent times. It included, in descending order, the scholars, the farmers, the craftsmen, and the merchants. Popular sentiment, however, did not always regard this established order as absolute. The supremacy of scholars, who usually shunned economic productivity, was often ridiculed by the more pragmatic common people. A popular saying in fact commented sarcastically, "They tell us that scholars come first and farmers second; all right. But when rice runs out and one is running around looking for it, then who should come first but the farmers?" This irreverent attitude toward scholars reflected the lesser extent of influence Confucianism exerted on the populace. The impact of Buddhism and Taoism, both also introduced by the Chinese, was perhaps much greater among them.

Buddhism came to Vietnam at the end of the second century B.C. and evolved through three periods, the first of which, the period of propagation, lasted until the sixth century. Buddhist philosophy observes that human beings are continually beset by sufferings from one life to the next. The sufferings that one endures in this life are the result of his doings in a previous life and actions in this life are the cause for sufferings in the next. The real cause of sufferings is man's greed; to eliminate sufferings, therefore, one must eliminate greed. From the seventh to the fourteenth century, Buddhism gained ascendency almost as a national religion in Vietnam. It was during this period that Vietnamese emperors adopted Chinese characters as the national script. Since Chinese Buddhist monks were also great literary scholars, they assumed the teaching of Chinese characters. The influence of Buddhism reached its apogee under the Ly and Tran

[2] Nam Phong Tap Chi, No. 172; Hanoi, May 1932.

dynasties whose emperors led a monastic life after abdicating from their thrones. The fifteenth century then saw the decline of Buddhism which increasingly came under attack by Confucianists. Buddhist monks gradually lost their scholarship and their grip on the true Buddhist creed; they eventually strayed into heresy, ritualism, and supertitious practices. Despite this, Buddhism remained a major religion in Vietnam with an estimated 80 percent of the population claiming to be adherents.

Aside from Buddhism, Vietnamese were also influenced by Taoism although to a lesser degree. Taoism was founded by a Chinese named Lao-Tzu at about the same time as Confucianism. Just as Mencius did for Confucianism, Chuang-Tzu, a disciple, continued to spread the Taoist philosophy and tradition after his master's death. Introduced in Vietnam under Chinese domination, Taoism had a broad following. However, because of the abstruseness of its ontology, perhaps very few understood it. The essence of Taoism lies in quietism and passivism, which implies that one must absolutely give up all concern and desire and ignore the bodily self in order to achieve spiritual purity and tranquility, a state of the mind devoid of all wishes and actions. Chuang-Tzu compared life to a dream. He told of a dream in which he was transformed into a butterfly; awake, he wondered whether he was a butterfly dreaming of becoming a man. Distorted interpretations of Taoism eventually degraded this philosophy into a popular creed characterized by superstition, magic, and sorcery and widely practiced by the Vietnamese common populace. Among the educated, the impact of Taoism was more philosophical. In general, it created a certain abhorrence of wealth and fame and the quest for an easy life and total freedom.

In short, the combined philosophies of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism exerted a rather unique influence on traditional Vietnamese society: a steadfast adherence to fatalism or the belief that everything was predestined or preordained by mysterious causes. This was a trait that seemed to affect the drive for action among Vietnamese whether as individuals or as a community. In their everyday lives, Vietnamese cleaved to the sages' teachings, especially the Confucianist code of ethics, and tended to act in accordance with precepts embodied in old legends and stories. This dominant Chinese influence began to wane only

upon contact with Western civilization during the French rule. However, in several aspects, it still lingers among the populace until today.

The Vietnamese Spirit of Struggle in Ancient Times

The permeating influence of Chinese civilization on Vietnam was never able to destroy the Vietnamese people's will to survive as a sovereign, independent nation and to expand that nation. This indomitable spirit manifested itself through the three main stresses of Vietnamese history: Resisting the North, Chastising the South, and Expanding Southward.

Resistance to the North was mainly directed against Chinese domination and aggression. Although during the thousand years of Chinese rule the Vietnamese had won back only three brief years of independence — from 40 to 43 A.D. -- their insurrection was highlighted by the fact that it was led by two heroines, the Trung Sisters. At the command of an ill-trained, ill-equipped army of 60,000 men, the Trung Sisters succeeded in throwing out the Chinese administrators and troops of the Eastern Han Dynasty by the sheer force of their patriotism. The return of the Chinese army under Ma Yuan eventually forced the Trung Sisters to drown themselves in the Hat River, but even in defeat, this valorous act demonstrated the invincible Vietnamese spirit. "Rather dead than living in shame" had become the predominant trait of national survival ever since.

The history of Vietnamese resistance to foreign aggression includes other illustrious exploits such as Tran Hung Dao's routing of the invincible Mongols in the thirteenth century and the conquest of southern China in the early eighteenth century by Emperor Quang Trung whose forces occupied the city of Ung Chau under the Sung dynasty (1706) and destroyed all roads and bridges before they withdrew to pre-empt a Chinese invasion.

Besides resounding feats against foreign aggression, the Vietnamese also distinguished themselves by actions designed to punish belligerent peoples to the South and colonize their territories in the process. These actions were dictated by the need to remove a serious threat posed by Champa and Chenla (Cambodia) whose armies had repeatedly invaded

since the second century A.D. (102). Then, at the turn of the 11th century (in the year 1044), the Vietnamese expansion southward began in earnest. By outright annexation, military conquests, or diplomatic maneuvers, this colonizing process did not end until the 18th century.

Two significant developments emerged during this southward movement. As national territory extended southward, the spirit of regionalism was born. It came as a result of difficulties in interregional communication, years of warfare or crop failure, insurgencies in many localities, and the weakening of royal authority with the concomitant strengthening of recalcitrant local authorities. This division of the country into regions each with its autonomous power eventually led to a feudal system with twelve warlords in the tenth century.

The second development was the establishment of villages. As the basic administrative unit, the Vietnamese village was autonomous and self-sufficient. The imperial court never dealt directly with villagers. It enforced laws, levied taxes, and impressed citizens into military service or work gangs through the intermediary of the village's council of notables who were elected by virtue of their titles, education, age, or wealth. This autonomous spirit led to each village having a separate charter which allowed the villagers to manage their own affairs and govern by themselves. Traditionally, therefore, Vietnamese liked to live in small communities. Their attachment and loyalties went first and foremost to their home villages.

Despite their isolation and limitations, villages constituted a true base from which southern expansion was launched. Rapid population growth and the inability of villages to expand beyond the confines of their bamboo hedges impelled villagers, especially young men and women without possessions, to pioneer and work adjacent lands and set up new villages with the assistance of old communities. Once the process was completed, the pioneering villagers reported to the emperor, who conferred a name to the new village, and upon their recommendation, decreed a titular god for the new community.

In general, from the time the nation was founded until the advent of French rule in the 19th century, the Vietnamese people had exhibited

two remarkable traits: a disposition for endurance, patience, conservatism, and fatalism, which was instilled by Chinese doctrines; and a spirit of survival, independence, and expansion which manifested itself in times of national distress. Under French domination, these traits gradually underwent changes in order to adjust to the new circumstances. Accelerated by new developments in world currents, these changes gained strong momentum during the second half of the 19th century.

Vietnamese Society Under French Rule

Ancient Vietnamese society first came into contact with Europeans during the 16th century in the persons of Christian missionaries. Initially, these missionaries came and went, but in the 17th century they came to stay.

Because of policy differences between the Trinh lords in the North and the Nguyen emperor in the South, missionaries were eventually forbidden to preach their religion and the converts severely punished. Still, the missionaries kept coming surreptitiously and the number of converts kept growing. Under the reign of Emperor Tu Duc, who suspected the missionaries of having political motives, the Vietnamese royal court ordered their persecution, giving France's Emperor Napoleon III an excuse to invade Vietnam in 1857. Eventually this led to French occupation of Vietnam and the establishment of French rule in 1883.

At the time of the first French attack, Vietnam already encompassed all of its present-day territory. The Nguyen dynasty divided the country into three regions, the South, the Center, and the North and placed a royal governor at the head of each region to insure a unified administration.

When the French took over, they maintained the same territorial division, apparently not for the same purposes, but gave each region a different administrative status in accordance with their objective of "divide and rule." The South (Cochinchina) became a colony directly governed by the French while the Center (Annam) and the North (Tonkin) were French "protectorates." The Vietnamese emperor was given some token authority over Annam but real power remained in the hands of the French Resident General at the head of each region.

In a move to further degrade the authority of the imperial court, which was executed through the system of mandarins, the French eliminated the mandarinate by replacing it with a French-trained civil service. Beginning in 1903, a prerequisite for a mandarin in Tonkin and Annam was the ability to speak French; then came the abolition of competitive examinations held by the court for the purpose of selecting mandarins. These old-style examinations in Chinese classics were discontinued in Tonkin in 1915 and in Annam in 1918. To train middle-echelon bureaucrats and professionals, the University of Hanoi was founded in 1918. The educational system set up then by the French sought primarily to train low-level civil servants to fill minor positions in the administration, those that required no French citizenship. There was no effort on the part of French authorities during that period to change or reorganize village government, perhaps because they saw no need for such a move or because the existing system suited their policy of ruling by division.

There was the theory that the French reorganization of government at high levels and the absence of such an effort at the local level had been instrumental in fomenting resistance against colonial rule by the mandarin class. This resistance, which manifested through various Can Vuong (Restoration) movements led by such patriots as Emperor Ham Nghi, De Tham, and Phan Dinh Phung existed presumably because the mandarins' interests were being threatened. However rationalistic it might sound, this theory could not hold true because in the Vietnamese context of that time such insurrections could only be led by men of prestige.

In their effort to create a new upper class to replace the old mandarinate, the French had greater success in Cochinchina than in Tonkin or Annam. A new land annexed to Vietnam barely a century before French occupation, Cochinchina was pioneer country. The local settlers, under the influence of the new environment with its immense fertile plains and productive rivers, had simpler and more open minds. They were especially less bound to tradition and the restrictive influence of Confucianism than the conservative people of Tonkin and Annam. Cochinchina also came into contact with the French much earlier than the other two regions, and the French had succeeded in forging some degree of harmony with the local people. Early exposure to French culture enabled

more Southerners to speak French and learn French ways; it also made their naturalization process much easier. A new class, therefore, emerged in Cochinchina which was made up of people in the French employ or having business relations with the French and large landowners. Benefiting from the French land development program during 1880-1939, these landowners eventually became the first indigenous bourgeois-capitalists of the whole country. With their favored treatment of this new rising class and their effort to win friends among Southerners by favoritist policies, the French managed to reinforce the spirit of regionalism that had been latent among Vietnamese.

In 1930, the French began to focus their attention on village government with an attempt to reduce village autonomy and the power of the council of notables and exert closer control over the rural peasantry. They instituted civil status records to include birth, death, and marriage so as to gain essential information for taxation purposes. They imposed strict control on matters of village finance and tax records and enacted laws to govern the council of notables and village charters. No longer was the village to enjoy the freedom of former times.

The changes in traditional Vietnamese society came about partially as a result of the French influence. While some of these changes were part of a systematic design, others, more important, came naturally from contacts with Western civilization and ideologies. It was this initiation to the Western world that spawned indigenous political parties and their tenacious struggle agianst French rule. These included both Vietnamese nationalist parties and the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP).

The Birth of Political Parties and The Resistance Movement

Familiarity with the French language and culture brought about beneficial results for the Vietnamese people. Through this language, Vietnamese had a chance to learn about new currents of thought and political doctrines unknown in traditional Vietnam such as individualism, democracy, and Marxism. Another benefit was the ability to think and reason independently on the part of the educated. In former times, the study of Chinese classics required a great deal of memorization since

all Chinese characters have different shapes. And since education consisted primarily of rote learning, many old-time scholars lacked the ability to think and reason. This shortcoming was remedied by the logical approach of Western education. Western ideologies, therefore, gained in value and finally conquered an increasing number of classical scholars especially after the eye-opening Japanese-Russian War of 1904. Bigger and modernly equipped Russian ships, they had seen for themselves, were battered by the Japanese Navy and forced to take refuge in a Vietnamese port for repair. This was a shining example, not lost on Vietnamese intellectuals, of the kind of progress that a weak Oriental people with essentially the same civilization as the Vietnamese had been able to achieve by its early awakening and modernization efforts. The lesson learned by our intellectuals was that the mastery of Western technology and doctrines could well enable a small nation to defeat a Western power.

A movement for off-shore training gained popularity almost overnight with Phan Boi Chau and Prince Cuong De in the vanguard. Both went to Japan in 1906 and founded in exile the Duy Tan (Modernization) movement with the purpose of liberating the country from French rule, restoring the monarchy, and modernizing Vietnam after the Japanese model. Expelled by the Japanese who yielded to French pressure, Phan Boi Chau went to Thailand then China. By 1911, he had managed to forge a relationship with some leaders of the Kuomintang and founded the Viet Nam Quang Phuc Hoi (Vietnam Restoration Party) whose objective was to eliminate French rule and transform Vietnam into a republic like China.

Quang Phuc Hoi secretly conducted its operations in the country. Its undertakings included the assassination of collaborators loyal to the French and the 1916 unsuccessful armed attempt to free revolutionaries from French jails in Saigon. In 1925, betrayed by Nguyen Ai Quoc (Ho Chi Minh), Phan Boi Chau was arrested by the French; he spent the rest of his life in banishment.

After the Quang Phuc Hoi, the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (Vietnam Kuomintang or Nationalist Party) came into being in 1927; its membership was overwhelmingly composed of the educated and people working for the French. Nguyen Thai Hoc was the leader of the Vietnam Nationalist Party (VNQDD). In February 1930, the VNQDD planned to launch an armed rebellion

by Vietnamese soldiers serving in French forces who were party members to coincide with a popular uprising. A last-minute change in plans was not disseminated in time to all elements concerned and resulted in the premature revolt by two Vietnamese rifle companies stationed in Yen Bai. The unsuccessful coup at Yen Bai led to the French bombing of Co An Village, Hai Duong Province, where the VNQDD maintained its headquarters and to the capture and execution of Nguyen Thai Hoc and 13 of his comrades. In 1932 after the French had arrested 74 more party members, the rest of the VNQDD fled to Yunnan. Subsequently, although its name and fame continued, the VNQDD virtually ceased all of its activities inside Vietnam

Another party, the Dai Viet Quoc Dan Dang (Greater Vietnam Nationalist Party) better known as the Dai Viet, was founded in 1940. Most of its members were graduates of the Hanoi University. The party's creation came in the wake of France's occupation by the Nazis and after French authorities in Indochina had been forced to let the Japanese set up military installations there. Despite a formal agreement concluded between the French Governor General and the Japanese, fighting broke out between French and Japanese troops in Lang Son as soon as the latter moved in from southern China. During the Lang Son firefight, the Japanese allied themselves with members of the Vietnam Phuc Quoc Hoi, giving them weapons to fight against the French. However, once their objective had been accomplished through negotiations, the Japanese immediately abandoned the Phuc Quoc Hoi which was soon crushed by the French. The remainder of the party fled underground to reemerge only in March 1945 when the Japanese overthrew the French in Indochina.

While the VNQDD and Dai Viet were active in the North, Cochinchina witnessed the emergence of the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao, two anti-French organizations which were at once religious and political.

The Cao Dai was founded in 1926. It was a creed which synthesized elements of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Christianity. Its philosophy was based on the belief that every religion had its strong points and that the best religion was the one which combined the essence of all religions. Tay Ninh was the Holy See of the Cao Dai where lived

the heaviest concentration of followers. Four years after its founding, to gain support in its opposition to the French, the Cao Dai proclaimed a policy of friendship towards the Japanese. This policy became pronounced under the leadership of Pope Pham Cong Tac. Realizing the potential threat of this religion, the French prohibited its propagation in Tonkin and Annam. In 1940, the French arrested Pope Pham Cong Tac and exiled him to Madagascar.

The Hoa Hao religious sect was born seven years after the Cao Dai. It gained ground mostly in the Western provinces of the Mekong Delta. The Hoa Hao creed was primarily Buddhist-oriented, but it also emphasized the cult of ancestors and the worship of national heroes. It viewed true devotion as stemming from the heart, not from formal rites. Therefore the Hoa Hao conducted worship services privately at home instead of at a pagoda. In its religious practice, each Hoa Hao family maintained an open-air altar in Buddha's honor, on which there were no offerings other than a single incense stick and a bowl of water. This simplicity of rites won over a large number of believers. In addition, the Hoa Hao founding father, Huynh Phu So, earned the admiration and trust of his followers through his ability to cure diseases with herbs and acupuncture. Like the Cao Dai, the Hoa Hao also advocated a policy of friendship with the Japanse in its efforts to resist the French. In 1940, Huynh Phu So was arrested by the French and jailed in Cai Be, My Tho Province. This only increased the veneration of his believers, and the number of Hoa Hao converts was growing day by day. Later, the French confined him to the Cho Quan mental institution where doctors were convinced of his perfect sanity. After his release, he continued to enjoy Japanese protection and secretly received Japanese weapons to equip his army.

The emergence of nationalist movements in Tonkin and Annam and of politically-motivated religious sects in Cochinchina together with the Communist front organization, the Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi (League for Vietnam Independence) or Viet Minh, highlighted the Vietnamese spirit of resistance against foreign domination which had existed since ancient times. However, a great difference separated the Nationalists from the Communists; while the Communists always seemed united in their action, nationalist groups struggled separately without regard to common interests

or a desire to coalesce into a unified national front.

This fact showed that traditionalism or conservatism coupled with the impact of French policies had debilitated the ranks of Vietnamese nationalists who seemed unable to rise above divisiveness and mutual suspicion. The major weakness of every nationalist group derived from the delusion that it alone was the champion of the national cause.

A Society in Transition

During her domination of Vietnam, France was involved in two world wars. World War I had compelled France to obtain resources from her colonies to satisfy the requirements of the war in Europe. In terms of human resources, France had impressed a total of 43,000 troops and 49,000 workers from Vietnam to serve in the French Army. To help finance the war effort, the French government also obtained funds from Vietnam by issuing treasury bonds under a program attractively called "the Vietnamese dragon spits money to help defeat Germany."

To exploit indigenous resources, the French operated rubber plantations in the South and coal mines in the North. The dearth of labor in Cochinchina prompted the French to recruit a work force from Tonkin, which was always overpopulated. French exploitation of workers and efforts to recruit workers in Tonkin to meet labor demands in Cochinchina and French possessions in the Pacific by impressing tax delinquents finally led to the assassination of Bazin, a French recruiter, in a Hanoi park in February 1929, touching off a series of arrests and repressive measures from French authorities.

To generate more revenue, the French legalized drinking and opium smoking. The sale of alcoholic beverages and opium, however, was a monopoly of the colonial government. Customs personnel, therefore, clamped down on moonshiners and those who dealt in alcohol and opium without a license. Though not prohibited, gambling during that period was not as widespread and open as it was in 1953-54, partly because of general poverty and partly because Vietnamese society was rather conservative.

Social stratification and class discrimination, once benign, now became accentuated. This was because the French had always wanted Vietnamese society to be deeply class-conscious. The old social hierarchy of "scholars-farmers-craftsmen-merchants" underwent some change which found the merchants prevailing over the farmers. A new class, the soldiers, had been added to the bottom rung of the social ladder; since they came mostly from the ranks of the illiterate peasantry, the soldiers were the most spurned by society. Men of letters still retained their preeminent rank although true scholars were becoming rare. During this transitional period, people with an elementary or junior high education were all called educated. That was the educational level required to qualify for a low or middle-level civil servant job, which was socially quite prestigious. Therefore, academic degrees, especially those conferred by French schools in country or in France, were the criteria by which a person's worth was evaluated, the crown of social success. Vietnamese were conscious of the prestige and distinction of French schools with French teachers and an all-French curriculum. In time, they assumed that there was a difference in value between the diplomas earned in French schools and those conferred by Vietnamese institutions although both curricula were practically the same. This prejudice pushed the snobbish and the well-to-do to send their children abroad, especially to France, or at least to local French schools to complete their education.

As for religion, Christianity gradually gained ascendency from the support of French authorities as well as from its own organizational success. Though much less numerous than Buddhists, the Roman Catholics constituted the most powerful community in Vietnam, especially in the North. For their part, the more numerous Buddhists were losing ground because of their inability to unite into a national religious organization and the fact that Buddhism became increasingly riddled by heresy and superstition.

In late 1944 and early 1945, a terrible famine struck North Vietnam causing more than a million deaths. This came as a result of floods and the fact that the peasants had been ordered by the French government to reduce their rice crop in order to plant jute which was being sought by the Japanese. Though causing the worst misery, the famine instigated

no popular revolt, a fact that testified to the French success in paralyzing Vietnamese society in a systematic way. French authorities took no action to organize or encourage relief. Meanwhile, of the huge rice surplus available in the South, the French redistributed only a tiny portion, more for propaganda than for humanitarian purposes.

In short, Vietnamese society at the end of World War II, after French rule had been suddenly terminated by the Japanese, displayed all the signs of stagnancy and backwardness. Still laboring under traditionalism and the vestiges of Chinese influence, this society was suffering from the half-hearted reforms and colonial policies of French rule. The process of eradicating ancient Chinese influence and reforming society on a modern pattern had just begun and resulted in many dislocations. This was a transitional period during which the old evil was yet to be replaced by the new good and the new evil had already arrived to add to the old one.

Nationalists who were fighting against the French were all patriotic, but they lacked political shrewdness and experience. Premature emergence from the underground also doomed their activities to failure. They were even betrayed by Vietnamese who shared their anti-colonialist stance but not their political ideas, then also by the Communists who sold them out to the French. Finally, those who had allied themselves with the Japanese against the French ended up being betrayed, too. This hopeless situation lasted until the Japanese defeat. By that time, nationalist parties had been so depleted of talent and leadership that they were unable to take advantage of the political vacuum and seize power. Their inaction gave the Communist Viet Minh a chance to prevail on the people's patriotism and win national independence. Cunningly concealing their true nature and posing as nationalists, the Communists had managed to win the prime sympathy of the people.

Contact With Communism

The Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) was founded in 1930. When the Viet Minh, its frontal organization, seized power on 19 August 1945, the overwhelming majority of Vietnamese had only a vague idea of Communism.

Of particular significance at this juncture, most Vietnamese at heart seemed to consider the Viet Minh as just another nationalist group with a different organization and policy.

The psychology of the Vietnamese people at that time was one of yearning for national independence. At any price, Vietnam had to be returned to Vietnamese rule; political persuasion only came second. Ho Chi Minh's skill was in his ability to exploit popular hatred of French colonialism and his manipulation of nationalists. In late 1945, therefore, he disbanded the Indochinese Communist Party to the confusion of domestic and world opinion. In fact, he had shrewdly prepared for an eventual showdown with the French that required total popular support for success.

In the rush of events that preceded the eruption of the resistance war against the French on 19 December 1946, the Viet Minh also astutely instituted some long due social reforms. They advanced a program of anti-feudalism and anti-colonialism. Feudalism, they maintained, was at the source of all social evils and had to be destroyed first; then came the fight against colonialism. The anti-feudalism campaign sought primarily to demolish all monarchical vestiges in Vietnam and eliminate the old ruling class.[3] Popular sentiment, however, was only lukewarm toward this effort. The majority of the Vietnamese people only saw the French as the main enemy to eliminate. Their spirit and courage were evident at the oubreak of the war, when the people of Hanoi organized themselves into self-defense groups and battled the French from house to house for one month. The Viet Minh government and army, meanwhile, had withdrawn from the capital city before fighting broke out to establish a defense line in the higlands.

The call to join the Viet Minh army and fight for national salvation during 1947-50 was enthusiastically supported by many men from the middle

[3]Pham Quynh, a prominent scholar, and Ngo Dinh Khoi were both assassinated during the process.

class. Many of them had risen to the positions of battalion and regimental commanders in Vo Nguyen Giap's army. But most of these people were subsequently purged when the Viet Minh, in a move toward socialism, began to systematically eliminate the rich, the large landowners, and the petty bourgeoisie through the device of class struggle and land reform.

Vietnamese from all walks of life, with the exception of destitute peasants and workers, were greatly disappointed. They felt that the Viet Minh had betrayed them after enticing them to join the resistance. Driven by patriotic ardor and zeal, they had never thought of themselves as belonging to the classes destined to be eliminated.

From the very beginning of this watershed event, the poor farm workers had gained ascendency as they were entrusted with leadership positions in villages, districts, and provinces against the will of members of other classes. But as the new leaders exercised power under the aegis of the Lao Dong (Communist) Party, opposition and criticism began to evaporate. This change in the power structure of society entailed drastic change in the role of the Vietnamese women. Heretofore, utterly dependent in a traditional way, they had now emerged as men's equal partners in all aspects of social endeavor.

Living under Viet Minh control, Vietnamese from disfavored classes suffered from a radical change in social values. Being mostly city dwellers, they had been brought to the countryside by the war. The Viet Minh's scorched-earth policy had deprived them of economic advantages, and in a sense, this had the good effect of bridging the gap between city and countryside.

However, beginning in 1950, and especially during 1951, when the Viet Minh launched a forceful campaign of class struggle under the land rent reduction program, the illusion of class harmony was quickly fading away and yielded to the stark fact that only one class, the class of landless peasants and workers, was to remain and that all others were to vanish regardless of their contributions to the resistance. For this reason, a number of nationalists began to leave the Viet Minh zone for the cities, especially after the political reincarnation of ex-Emperor Bao Dai who was being used as a rallying point for those disillusioned with the Viet Minh. Except for Central Vietnam where royalist sentiments

were still strong, Bao Dai failed to attract enough ralliers elsewhere because of his pro-French stance. Nevertheless, he was the only straw for all nationalists to cling to while they waited for a chance to revive their cause. The only alternative would have been capitulation and complete subservience to the French.

The socialist transformation carried out by the Viet Minh was forceful and rigid in North and Central Vietnam. But in the South, it had been so mild that in 1954 when the Geneva Agreements were concluded there were no significant popular grievances against Communist policy except for a few die-hard nationalists and members of the Cao Dai, Hoa Hao and Binh Xuyen, who had been frustrated with the treachery of the Communists Viet Minh.

The French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in May 1954 led rapidly to the signing of the Geneva Cease-Fire Agreement in late July 1954. Vietnam, was temporarily divided at the 17th parallel into two zones, North and South, pending the holding of general elections to reunify the country. The North was under a Communist government led by Ho Chi Minh while the South, nominally under the leadership of ex-Emperor Bao Dai and a nationalist government headed by Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem, still labored under French political and military control.

In its first steps toward regaining full sovereignty, South Vietnam had become an arena for the infighting of several opposing forces. First there was the French influence, which was exerted by the presence of the French High Commissioner and the French Expeditionary Corps. Then there were pro-French groups who worked with the French to promote their material interests as well as dubious political aims. In direct opposition to the French, there were the Communist Viet Minh who, despite their regrouping to the North, still enjoyed tremendous popular sympathy; their infrastructure and capability to return constituted perhaps the most obvious threat. All forces of nationalist persuasion wanted to take advantage of the temporary partition and the impending withdrawal of French forces to forge an independent course for the building of a non-Communist nation. To achieve this, they, who had never lived in harmony with each other, had to find a common rallying point.

In the midst of these searing conflicts, the stabilization of South Vietnam required immediate solutions in several areas. There were social differences to patch up; there was the shaky old order to unravel while a foundation for new values had yet to become firm; there was the need for rehabilitating a countryside torn up by war in addition to satisfying a Westernized pluralistic city population which was forever clamoring for more benefits; finally, there were the smoldering embers of discrimination to be mitigated, and this encompassed almost the entire fabric of society. Even though the American involvement was most opportune, the initial stages of South Vietnam's struggle to stand on its own feet were beset with obstacles. The extent of the nation-building effort and American assistance, the gravity of social problems, and the issues of government and leadership will be the topics of discussion in the following chapters.

CHAPTER II

The Consolidation of South Vietnam

The Preliminary Conditions

In the aftermath of the Dien Bien Phu debacle on 7 May 1954, the balance of power in Vietnam tilted heavily toward the Communist Viet Minh. Faced with increasing pressure, the French High Command in Indochina decided to abandon the Red River Delta and to redeploy its forces for the defense of the Hanoi and Hai Phong areas and Route No. 5 which was the vital corridor linking these two important cities. This audacious decision and its speedy execution were a military success in that it released enough forces to provide the reinforcements required for the defense of these last French enclaves in North Vietnam.

On the other hand this withdrawal of French forces brought about momentous consequences. The loyal population of the Red River Delta, who had rallied for many years to the Bao Dai government and fought against the Communist Viet Minh, suddenly found themselves vulnerable. As the last units of the French Union forces destroyed bridges and roads behind them, the Nationalist people in the provinces of Ninh Binh, Nam Dinh, Ha Nam and Hung Yen hastily began their flight toward Hanoi. Their exit was far from being easy. First, the event was totally unexpected; except for high-ranking military authorities, few could have envisaged such a rapid defeat. Nobody in fact had been prepared for this departure. Second, all lines of communication had been cut off. The worst difficulties were experienced by the people of the two Roman Catholic dioceses of Phat Diem and Bui Chu, the most remote areas which were also the most actively anti-Communist being abandoned.

The Geneva Agreements of 20 July 1954 eventually resolved the military predicament of the French and provided the people of Vietnam the opportunity of choosing between the two newly divided zones. A

moratorium was subsequently implemented during which Communist forces took over areas still under French control. It was also the period of authorized evacuation for the population of both zones; for the Hanoi-Haiphong area, this moratorium was set at 300 days.

During the first few days of this evacuation, the Communists virtually took no action. People from the southern Delta of North Vietnam were moving in droves into the Hanoi-Haiphong area. In spite of the impassable roads and bridges, they kept moving by all available means: walking, wading across rice fields and rivulets, and boating down rivers or along the coast to Haiphong if they lived near the sea.

After a few days had passed Communist authorities realized the complications that were being caused by these mass movements. They began to interfere, first with mild measures, then with sterner and increasingly violent actions. Many villages and towns were cordoned off and placed under close surveillance; people were allowed to move only if they had special passes. Despite this, the refugees managed to flee under cover of darkness or by other surreptitious ways. Their immediate goal was to reach the Hanoi-Haiphong area; from there evacuation to South Vietnam became almost a certainty.

Among the groups that were leaving, the most cohesive and best organized were perhaps the Roman Catholics; led by determined priests they would not hesitate to use violence to clear their way. Some, however, were less successful. As commander of an armor unit stationed on Route No. 5 at that time, I personally observed the plight of one such community nearby, the Catholic village of Kim Bich, about 10 km north of Hai Duong.[1] All the villagers wanted to leave but the cordon of Viet Minh guerrillas was too tight. To deliver them, I had to maneuver my armor unit through the cordon. Without my armored vehicles, it would have been impossible for these villagers to break through and leave. This occurred just one week after cease-fire day.

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[1]This commander was Nguyen Duy Hinh. In 1972 he was promoted to Major General, as Commander of the 3d ARVN Division, and is the coauthor of this monograph.

Even in the areas under the control of French and Vietnamese forces, the departure of the people, especially government officials, was not easy. At that time the Communists had their cadres and agents deployed almost everywhere, even in the inner cities. Many households were visited by cadres who advised against leaving or threatened to keep them from leaving. For many people, therefore, the departure from Hanoi or Haiphong had to be carried out discreetly. Properties and houses could not be sold or belongings carried away openly. Preparations for the exodus had to be made to appear as if people were intent on staying. The more discreet the preparations, the better the chance of successful departure.

Against units of the National Army of Vietnam, the Communists implemented a cunning scheme. Early on the morning of cease-fire day, most remote outposts and installations were besieged, not by Communist forces, but by groups of women, young and old. They had come, they said, to celebrate the cease-fire and to invite our troops to leave their units now that hostilities were over. Even troop movements were delayed by groups of these women. Many convoys were forced to a halt and a number of men left their units. Furthermore, during the time they waited for their departure by ship to the South, many of our wavering soldiers began to desert. Either they had received news from their families being held as hostages or visits by relatives who, under Communist coercion, were begging them to stay. Although commanders had tried to evacuate dependents along with the troops, they could not help those soldiers whose families lived in remote areas. This accounted for an unusually high desertion rate among soldiers prior to the evacuation from the North.

Eventually, as a result of American and French relief efforts, nearly a million Vietnamese located in the North had made their way to the South by planes or by ships. Had it not been for the obstructions and ploys of Communist authorities, the exodus would have been considerably larger.

What had impelled these many North Vietnamese to leave their places of birth and accept an uncertain future? Vietnamese had always been

strongly attached to their native land. It was where their ancestors had been buried, where their relatives lived, and where they maintained a home, a garden, or a ricefield which might have taken generations to acquire. Their departure in many cases had been fraught with pain and innumerable hazards. Even those who had collaborated with the Viet Minh in fighting against the French for several years now resigned themselves to follow the refugees's steps, aware that they were going to live under a regime which was still largely pro-French.

There were several reasons for this mass exodus. The most powerful driving force was obviously the determination to fight Communism which had been acquired through experience with the Viet Minh. If during the early years of 1945-48 the entire Vietnamese people had seemed to be carried away by patriotic ardor, it was because the Viet Minh had carefully concealed their Marxist nature. But in later years, after the Viet Minh nationalistic mask had dropped, many people realized they had been duped by the most blatant scheme of exploitation and deceit. The resistance against the French had given the Vietnamese Communist Party its supreme status. From 1950 on, Vietnamese Communist leaders felt so reassured of popular support that they embarked on a class struggle movement in many areas even though, in Vietnamese society, there were no serious class distinctions or conflicts. The middle class and petty bourgeois, though not rich, felt themselves threatened despite the fact that they had sacrificed a great deal for the cause of the resistance.

For those who had connections with nationalist parties, past experience was even more traumatic. Their cooperation with the Viet Minh in an anti-French coalition, called Vietnam Revolutionary League from 1942 to 1945, only strengthened the position of the Viet Minh, which was an offspring of the Indochinese Communist Party. Nationalist leaders who subsequently joined Ho Chi Minh's coalition government in late 1945 found themselves used and betrayed. A civil war, therefore, broke out between Viet Minh and Nationalist forces and continued until well after French forces had moved into North Vietnam in 1946 to replace Nationalist Chinese forces. The Viet Minh then collaborated with the French to eliminate their enemies. For several months, bloody battles

raged in the highland provinces of Vinh Yen, Phuc Yen, Phu Tho, Viet Tri, and Lao Kay during which the Viet Minh army systematically annihilated armed elements of the Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang. In Haiphong and Lang Son, the Viet Minh mercilessly crushed the Vietnam Cach Mang Dong Minh Hoi, their allies during maquis days. Then, they attacked and destroyed the Dai Viet strongholds in the Hon Gay-Cam Pha area. By June 1946, all nationalist forces had been driven out into southern China. Finally, the Viet Minh moved rapidly to take over the headquarters of these parties in Hanoi in June 1946. Their subsequent hunt for remaining Nationalist elements in Hanoi and the provinces resulted in tortures and executions that were to remain forever a nationalist nightmare. All these events demonstrated that Nationalists and Communists simply could not coexist. They also explained why the nationalist hatred toward Communists had been so deep-seated over the years.

The love for freedom in general was also a strong motivating force behind the exodus of Northerners. Vietnamese are basically liberty-loving people. They tenaciously fought against foreign domination because of their ingrained spirit of freedom and independence. Cognizant of this sensitivity, even French administrators had left the material and spiritual life of Vietnamese families and villages largely undisturbed. Therefore, except for superficial changes in towns and cities, under French rule the overwhelming majority of Vietnamese still retained their own way of life. Rural peasants continued to enjoy a physically harsh but spiritually unfettered and free existence. This freedom to work, to enjoy the fruits of one's labor, and to live as one pleased was gradually curtailed and life was increasingly regimented under a Viet Minh regime.

Granted that a nation fighting for its independence had to accept sacrifice and some abridgment of liberties. But it was a different matter when these restrictions paved the way for authoritarian rule. Several well-to-do citizens offered their properties in support of the government, feeding troops, and sponsoring organizations, but this inevitable contribution was anything but voluntary. There was no longer any freedom of thought because all imprudent expressions or grievances were automatically regarded as traitorous or reactionary behavior.

Communist fund drives and subtle exploitation under the cloak of resistance against the French failed to cover up their ulterior motives and long-range plans. The situation was such that most citizens with wealth and properties had to relinquish everything and leave. Impoverished by Viet Minh exploitation, the poor became poorer and would have fled also if they had had the means.

In spite of the regime's protestations of all sorts of freedoms, the actions and policies of the Viet Minh showed that freedom of religion was not guaranteed. The Buddhists, always lacking in cohesion and organization, remained silent. But the Catholic community, which was well organized and led, had come into conflict with the Viet Minh from the very first days of the "August 1945 Revolution." These conflicts had become more and more serious although Ho Chi Minh was constantly proclaiming freedom of religion. During the war, wherever French forces moved in, Catholic villages that had been resisting Viet Minh authorities in isolation began to cooperate in the pacification efforts of the Nationalist government and the French High Command. When this pacification spread to the coastal provinces of Nam Dinh and Ninh Binh, the two largest catholic dioceses of North Vietnam, Bui Chu and Phat Diem, became instantly anti-Communist strongholds. Under the leadership of two prominent bishops, Pham Ngoc Chi and Le Huu Tu, both dioceses organized their own combat villages and formed their own self-defense forces. When the country was later partitioned, it was no wonder that most evacuees consisted of Catholics. They had fought atheism and were determined to seek freedom of religion.

When North Vietnamese in search of freedom arrived in South Vietnam in 1954, the naive and accommodating attitude of most Southerners toward the Communists caught them by surprise. Apparently, the Viet Minh had not yet revealed their true character to the local population. It could be that since they were far removed from their main base in North Vietnam, the Viet Minh had not firmly established themselves, and their forces had not enjoyed the military and political strength that they had in the North. In South Vietnam, the catch phrase advocated by the Viet Minh to enlist popular support had not gone beyond "National unity to fight the French and regain national independence." The bloody

socialist transformation that the Viet Minh were implementing elsewhere in the country was not conspicuous; at least, it had not been perceived as keenly by Southerners as it had been by Northerners.

However, among the upper class of South Vietnamese society, among members of nationalist parties, and among religious sects, anti-Communist feelings were particularly strong. For these people, the true dictatorial and bloodthirsty character of the Communist Viet Minh had revealed itself fairly early. In 1945, the scramble for leadership of the resistance movement against the French had brought to light the many wiles of Tran Van Giau and later of Nguyen Binh, both of the Viet Minh. Following the Japanese capitulation, Nationalist leaders promptly joined forces and took over leadership of the movement in Saigon, but for the purpose of uniting forces against the French they later yielded leadership to Tran Van Giau. In their jockeying for power, the Viet Minh did not hesitate to liquidate any adversaries they deemed dangerous. Bui Quang Chieu, founder of the Constitutionalist Party, Vo Van Nga, leader of the Party for Independence, and Nguyen Van Sam, the Imperial Delegate to Cochinchina, were all assassinated. In Hue, the Viet Minh killed the scholar Pham Quynh and Ngo Dinh Khoi, Ngo Dinh Diem's eldest brother, both from the former Bao Dai government and dignitaries with prestige in their times. The Viet Minh did not even spare their own comrades who happened to have divergent views; they killed Ta Thu Thau, for example, who was leader of the Trotskyist Struggle Group. This reign of terror eventually brought about the collapse of the nationalist movement in the South and gave the Viet Minh the indisputable leadership position in the resistance movement.

To the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects and the Binh Xuyen organization, the Viet Minh initially showed some restraint, but still tried to dominate them. Eventually, however, when cooperation had proved all but impossible, Huynh Phu So, the Hoa Hao spiritual leader, was ambushed and killed. Fearing the same fate, the Cao Dai Pope, Pham Cong Tac, had to flee to Cambodia. As for the Binh Xuyen, after collaborating with the Viet Minh for some time, they, too, realized the threat to their own existence and switched allegiance to the French. From then on, it could be said that

all Cao Dai and Hoa Hao adherents and members of the Binh Xuyen were the most dedicated anti-Communists of South Vietnam.

When South Vietnam emerged as a nation south of the 17th parallel, it was built on a large anti-Communist base. This base consisted of a million North Vietnamese refugees to include families of military and civil servants, over three million Cao Dai and Hoa Hao adherents, and other military and paramilitary forces. South Vietnamese society at that time could be divided into three significant categories: a small minority with Communist connection and underground Communist cadres, who were hostile to the Nationalist cause; the urban middle class whose social status made them incompatible with a Communist regime; and the rural peasantry which was uncommitted but malleable. The conditions were therefore opportune for the forging of a strong anti-Communist regime. But much seemed to depend on how the South Vietnamese government proceeded and whether this government could demonstrate its usefulness to the people.

Nationalism or the Nationalist cause upon which the Republic of Vietnam was being built was conceived as an antithesis to international Communism and as an ideological tool for motivation. The preservation of Vietnamese traditions, the maintenance of what remained of the Vietnamese heritage after nearly a century of French rule and nine years of destructive war and economic development, were promoted as strong incentives for the nation-building effort. South Vietnam certainly was not lacking in natural resources. With time and devotion, it should be able to heal all wounds of the past and become a strong, viable nation.

If Communist North Vietnam had the support of international Communism, South Vietnam was also enjoying increasing American support. A clear proof of this was the U.S. relief given to Northern refugees who were resettling in the South. The U.S. also refused to be a signatory party to the Geneva Agreements, which was another indication of U.S. commitment to the Nationalist cause. As tension increased during the Cold War that pitted the United States against the Soviet Union and especially after the Communist take-over of mainland China and the invasion of South Korea, there was no doubt that the United States had

hardened its line against Communist expansion. With American support, South Vietnam appeared to have an excellent opportunity for success.

But South Vietnam's path was full of difficulties and hazards. The difficulties lay in the ravages caused by war, the divided allegiances of a people who seemed not easily amenable to a common purpose, and the necessity to maintain security and political stability during the nation-building effort. The hazards were primarily in the two-year period immediately following the partition of Vietnam and prior to unification through general elections. But since conditions were favorable for survival, the anti-Communist elements in South Vietnam nurtured the hope that under the U.S. protective shield, their new nation could be built into a durable anti-Communist bastion of the Free World in Southeast Asia. In the tense atmosphere of the mid-50's this was also the policy pursued with conviction by the United States in this part of the world.

Building Strength and A National Cause

One result of the 1954 Geneva Agreements was the creation of two Vietnams antagonistic to each other. When they came to take control of Hanoi after eight years of absence from the city, Ho Chi Minh, his government, and the Workers' (Communist) Party undoubtedly enjoyed tremendous political advantages. Having driven out the French and won back independence they were now basking in glory as the indisputable champion of the national cause in the eyes of many North Vietnamese people. After the last French units had withdrawn from Haiphong, North Vietnam was in perfect control of its own destiny. Eight years of war had thoroughly trained and prepared the North Vietnamese civil and military machinery to assume new endeavors. Though deprived of the manpower and skills that nearly a million people, or 17% of its total work force, had taken with them, the North could still make use of the considerable amount of property they left behind. To the world, and especially to the Communist bloc and the emerging nations of the Third World, North Vietnam was the prestigious hero of the resistance, a fact

that seemed to diminish the status of South Vietnam and prompted outside observers to doubt its chances of survival.

Indeed, stability, the primary condition that South Vietnam needed for its survival was still a matter of conjecture. Long accustomed to existing in the shadow of the French, this part of the country emerged utterly unprepared to stand on its own feet. The antiquated, French-dominated administration was filled with people who had no understanding of the impending ideological struggle and had never been given a chance to make decisions for themselves. It was highly problematic that this administration could carry out new policies that required both ideological struggle and nation-building at the same time. Though numerous, nationalist factions and organizations were yet to show their ability to create strength through unity; if anything, they were already showing signs of divisiveness. It seemed that their leaders had learned nothing from their years of struggle with the Viet Minh, and popular confidence in their talents and prestige was tenuous at best. Such was the general situation in the South when Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem was appointed by Chief of State Bao Dai to serve as Prime Minister with full political and military powers.

This situation was both dark and difficult, especially for a new Prime Minister who, though enjoying personal prestige, had no real power base and was not supported by the French. This situation required first and foremost that he have a strong government and a unified, trustworthy army. But the Army was against him because it was led by pro-French generals and officers who had been appointed, supported, and commanded by the French. The police and security forces refused to take orders from him because law enforcement had been entrusted by the Chief of State to the armed Binh Xuyen bandits, who were now controlling it with a free hand. Mr. Diem's desire to rally nationalist forces behind him also ran counter to the selfish interests of the armed religious sects. Both the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao had carved out their own empires and were protecting them with jealousy. The French themselves were unwilling to relinquish their colonial holdings. The French Expeditionary forces had no intention of leaving Indochina, and French capitalists, who

controlled banks, factories, and plantations, were naturally the last ones who desired to see French influence decline. Vietnamese politicians of Bao Dai's regime, who had been accustomed to fishing in troubled water and holing themselves up in ivory towers to bide their time, had all the less intention to cooperate with Mr. Diem after judging the situation as being too difficult. Meanwhile, nationalist parties, perhaps still stunned by events and most of all by the Communist victory, failed to contribute anything significant.

The only hope for Mr. Diem, therefore, lay in the popular masses, who had suffered the most from the vicissitudes of the war, the North Vietnamese refugees who were looking forward to a fresh start in the South, and the rank and file of the National Armed Forces who were genuinely expecting strong measures from the government. These were probably the most positive forces on which Mr. Diem could rely in the murky situation of South Vietnam in late 1954.

Any nationalist government intent on rebuilding South Vietnam at that time could not fail to come to grips with a number of urgent problems. The first priority task, which was essential for the survival of the regime, was gaining full control of the army and rallying the autonomous armed factions that were defying governmental authority. No less important was the need to create internal unity, a common purpose and maintain law and order which were all necessary for the normal functioning of the state. Furthermore, government would succeed only if it could find a worthy national cause to vie with North Vietnam and with which the people could identify. This cause was none other than gaining full independence, that is, freedom from French dominance and building an effective, popularly accepted form of government.

Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem, even though cloistered in his palace, had the courage to reject compromise and to take firm actions toward fulfilling his objectives. He embarked on solving domestic problems first. His opponents were numerous and openly hostile to him. General Nguyen Van Hinh, the Chief of the General Staff of the National Army, declared openly that he needed only to pick up the telephone to unleash a coup d'etat; the Binh Xuyen, the Cao Dai, and the Hoa Hao were all

proving very unfriendly. Unable to solve all the problem at the same time, Mr. Diem tackled them one by one.

The first and urgent task was to replace General Hinh while maintaining friendly relations with the religious sects. General Hinh, the son of former Prime Minister Nguyen Van Tam, had been a major in the French Air Force, had French nationality, and was married to a French woman. Employed by the French and elevated by them to the top position of the National Army, General Hinh could not fail to serve French interests. The elimination of General Hinh, therefore, took on the added meaning of erasing French influence in the South Vietnamese armed forces.

The crisis came to a showdown early in September 1954, when Prime Minister Diem sent General Hinh to France on a military study mission. General Hinh refused to go, and from then on the conflict broke into the open. The Binh Xuyen, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao joined forces to support General Hinh; they petitioned Chief of State Bao Dai to replace the Prime Minister. At this critical juncture, nine cabinet members tended their resignation; but Prime Minister Diem did not give up. He reshuffled his cabinet and, by financial rewards, was able to bring eight leaders of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao into his government. In late September, a new development seemed to tip the balance in the Prime Minister's favor: the Cao Dai general, Trinh Minh The, rallied with all the troops under his command.

Despite this, it took Mr. Diem three months to settle the General Hinh affair. Finally, in the face of unambiguous American support for Mr. Diem, the French backed down. In mid-November 1954, heeding a call from the Chief of State, General Hinh set out for France; in Saigon, General Le Van Ty was appointed new Chief of the General Staff. This was the first step toward consolidating the South Vietnamese government; because of the dangers involved, it was probably Mr. Diem's first big victory.

During this period, the situation was far from being peaceful in Saigon and in the provinces. In Saigon itself, the Binh Xuyen was in firm control of the police and security forces. Police precincts stationed throughout the city were also Binh Xuyen fortresses. Gambling casinos, brothels, and opium dens that dotted the city were under their

sponsorship. Two main Binh Xuyen business enterprises, the Dai The Gioi gambling casino and the Binh Khanh brothel, opened for business day and night and were prospering. The arrogance of the Binh Xuyen police, their aggressiveness, and overbearing attitude were everyday occurrences in the streets of Saigon. The people and soldiers of the National Army were enraged; they expected nothing less than a general clean-up of this gang of official bandits.

In the provinces north and southwest of the capital, the Cao Dai and Hoa Hoa armies were imposing their feudal rule. For much too long, while fighting the Viet Minh and maintaining control over vast regions, they had been unrestrained in their actions, exploiting, collecting taxes, and bullying the people. High-ranking Cao Dai and Hoa Hao officers, though commanding some following, were far from leading an honest and moral life. With their armed units these religious sects were able to control and rule large rural areas while the people silently suffered. Under such circumstances, eliminating these armed groups was only conforming to the will of the people.

Having gained control of the National Army, Prime Minister Diem turned to his next task, that of eliminating the "feudal lords." Instead of doing it in one swift action, he skillfully maneuvered to create division among them, bribing some to pit them against others. His tactic was to clip their wings one by one in order to minimize losses. As a result of his maneuvers, in January 1955, two Hoa Hao groups rallied to the government: Colonel Nguyen Van Hue, General Tran Van Soai's Chief of Staff, with 3,500 men; and Major Nguyen Day with 1,500 men. Then, in late January 1955, Cao Dai general, Trinh Minh The turned over the remainder of his army. On 13 February 1955, his black shirt brigade, 5,000 strong, paraded in front of the diplomatic corps in Saigon, marking an undeniable triumph for Prime Minister Diem and for all of South Vietnam. For his loyalty, Trinh Minh The was immediately appointed a Brigadier General in the National Army.

The first three months of 1955, therefore, consisted of governmental maneuverings and machinations by the dissident groups. Though joined in a formal unified front against Mr. Diem, the religious sects and the Binh Xuyen failed to forge a true alliance. At the end of February 1955,

Cao Dai general, Nguyen Thanh Phuong, spokesman of this unified front, also rallied to the government with his army.

Thus, the only remaining opponent to the government was the Binh Xuyen, but, for obvious reasons, Prime Minister Diem was not anxious to gain their allegiance. In January 1955, in a drive to eliminate social vices, the government refused to renew the licenses of the Dai The Gioi gambling casino and the Binh Khang brothel. It was obvious that the conflict with the Binh Xuyen was becoming critical.

In late March 1955 the first important firefight broke out between government troops and the Binh Xuyen at the Saigon Police Headquarters; both sides sustained casualties. The French High Commissioner, General Paul Ely, intervened to prevent the National Army from attacking the Binh Xuyen. French forces were also deployed in blocking positions. They cut off supplies to the National Army while abetting the Binh Xuyen and allowing them to move and reinforce key areas.

The crisis in Saigon deepened. Several important cabinet ministers resigned, including Foreign Minister Tran Van Do and Defense Minister Ho Thong Minh. While the French almost openly supported the anti-government faction, the American position remained equivocal. In the face of this impasse, Prime Minister Diem decided to act forcefully.

On 28 April 1955, Army units launched a concerted attack on the Binh Xuyen with Trinh Minh The's brigade in the vanguard. After two days of fighting, all Binh Xuyen forces were driven out of the city. Forced out of the Saigon area, the remnants of the Binh Xuyen went into hiding in the Rung Sat, a swampy mangrove near the sea, southeast of the capital. A few months later, surrounded and battered by the National Army and demoralized by privation, and disease, the Binh Xuyen began to disintegrate and surrendered. Le Van Vien, their leader and some of his henchmen fled to France.

Actions against the Binh Xuyen chagrined Chief of State Bao Dai. Overplaying his hand he summoned Prime Minister Diem and the Chief of the General Staff, General Le Van Ty, to France for consultation. Both simply refused to comply with his order. It was all too apparent that the power of Bao Dai as an absentee chief of state began to evaporate once the United States threw its full support behind Prime Minister

Diem. On the other hand, the once-secret desire of the French to obstruct the consolidation of the new South Vietnamese government by encouraging the Binh Xuyen and religious sects also came out into the open. It was, therefore, no surprise that Bao Dai was later removed and the French asked to leave.

As for the Cao Dai sect, after the rallying of Generals Trinh Minh The and Nguyen Thanh Phuong and their forces, its strength had practically vanished. His problem with the Cao Dai now being political in nature, Prime Minister Diem applied an indirect tactic. In October 1955, Cao Dai general, Nguyen Thanh Phuong took his own troops to Tay Ninh to eliminate the dissident elements of his own sect. Pope Pham Cong Tac, accused of obscurantism, was deposed and fled to Cambodia, where he remained until his death. Unlike the Cao Dai, the Hoa Hao forces in the Mekong Delta were strong and more obstinate. To subdue them, Army units launched a large-scale operation in early June 1955 which forced five Hoa Hao battalions to surrender at Cai Von, near Can Tho. A Hoa Hao chieftain, General Nguyen Giac Ngo, also surrendered shortly thereafter, but General Tran Van Soai, alias Nam Lua, massed his forces near the Cambodian border for a showdown with government troops. Overwhelmed, General Soai, along with General Nguyen Van Hinh and General Nguyen Van Vy who had been sent back by Bao Dai to organize the fighting, was forced to flee into Cambodia. Early the following year, General Soai capitulated. Hoa Hao remnants now consisted of guerrilla bands under the command of General Le Quang Vinh, alias Ba Cut. In April 1956, Ba Cut was captured in an ambush, and after trial by a court-martial, was executed in Can Tho on 13 June 1956.

While endeavoring to unify nationalist forces, the Ngo Dinh Diem government also acted to regain full national sovereignty. This was an important move, especially since North Vietnam under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh had showed that it was independent. South Vietnam could not afford to be second in the eyes of the people, who wanted complete independence and the removal of all colonial vestiges. It was also a matter of prestige for South Vietnam as a newcomer in the community of nations. This competition for popular standing and national prestige

was hardly possible with the continued presence of a French High Commissioner and the French Expeditionary Corps. Furthermore, when France signed the Geneva Agreements, she had pledged to withdraw from Indochina. Therefore, when the United States proceeded to urge France to return all sovereign powers to the South Vietnamese government, much to her regret, she had no choice but to comply. Since September 1954, the court system, national police, and civilian aeronautics had already been turned over to Vietnamese authorities. Then, at the end of 1954, after an economic and financial agreement, the Bank of Indochina and other French financial institutions were disbanded. The National Bank of Vietnam was created and began operation in early 1955. A few days later, the commercial port of Saigon also came under Vietnamese control.

Up to this point, everyone could see that the Ngo Dinh Diem government had achieved considerable progress, and no one could have any doubt about the positive course that South Vietnam was taking. Prime Minister Diem, whose resolve was now well-known, continued to press for full sovereignty. By the end of 1955, the French High Command had left Saigon, and all remaining French Union forces had regrouped to a transit station at Vung Tau. The General Staff of the Vietnamese National Army, now weaned from dependence on the French High Command, was prepared to carry out programs of reorganization and training with the assistance of the United States Training Relations and Instruction Mission (TRIM).

In late 1955, as if to sweep away the last vestiges of colonialism, the South Vietnamese government began to tackle the problem of French nationality. At this time a fairly large number of Vietnamese government officials and military officers had French nationality. Each individual concerned was given six months to decide on his nationality after which time no one with French nationality would be allowed to serve in the Vietnamese national government. Generals Tran Van Don and Tran Van Minh, Ambassador Tran Van Chuong, and several others chose to relinquish French citizenship. On this occasion, many Vietnamese officers also parted with their French names. For the National Armed Forces, a new system of rank insignia was instituted to replace the old one of French origin. The French insignia burning ceremony, held at the

Joint General Staff headquarters, was a sensational occasion that excited the curiosity of the press and the people.

At the end of April 1956, after further requests by the South Vietnamese government, the last French forces left Vietnam, ending a long French military presence in the South. Relations with France were subsequently maintained on the diplomatic, economic, and cultural levels, the only relations that South Vietnam wanted to keep for its own benefit.

Prime Minister Diem's uncompromising attitude toward feudal warlordism and French dominance underlined his determination to erase all vestiges of the colonial past and steer the nation toward a new destiny. This could not be achieved as long as his leadership was handicapped. Some maintained that Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem had always had the ambition of becoming chief of state and had prepared plans to depose Bao Dai. While there was no evidence to substantiate this, by that time, Mr. Diem had unquestionably demonstrated that he was the leader the nation needed. There was no doubt that Bao Dai had lost all of his prestige with the people.

In his youth, when returning home from his studies in France in 1932, Bao Dai had nurtured the dream of modernizing the country for the benefit of his people. He had enjoyed some measure of respectability. But when confronted with French rejection of his reforms, he had resigned himself to the role of a figurehead. Besides, he was the descendent of a royal line that the people held responsible for France's subjugation of Vietnam.

He had let an opportunity to save his country slip away when the Japanese overthrew French rule on 9 March, 1945. The banner was then passed on to him, but he failed to act. His role was banished from history when in August 1945 the Viet Minh rose to power and he had to abdicate. For his acceptance to serve as Ho Chi Minh's adviser, the Communists lauded him as "patriotic" and "wise". But the Nationalists were distressed that he was not a person with a will to fight.

When the French realized that they could not win the military war against the Viet Minh, they looked for a figurehead for their "nationalist solution" experiment in hopes of diluting the ranks of

resistance fighters. Bao Dai consented to play this role in 1949 after some of his conditions were met. But instead of taking advantage of the French impasse to work for the nationalist cause, he once again accepted the position of being a mere puppet. French authorities must have been reassured to see the Vietnamese chief of state spending most of his time on the French Riviera, leaving them a free hand to rule the new state as they wanted. His dissipated life forced him to accept money even from gangsters. That was how the Binh Xuyen had been put in charge of the Saigon police force. Bao Dai's fate was sealed when Prime Minister Diem ignored his summons after the disintegration of the Binh Xuyen.

On 7 July 1955, in a ceremony to commemorate the first anniversary of his government, Prime Minister Diem announced that a popular referendum would be held on 23 October of that year so that the people could choose their own form of government. By doing this, he had forced a popular choice between himself and ex-Emperor Bao Dai. The result of the referendum was a foregone conclusion. Given the people's attitude at that time, there was no need for any maneuverings on the part of Prime Minister Diem's supporters. On 26 October 1955 in a solemn ceremony, Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem declared South Vietnam a Republic, and officially assumed its first Presidency.

The downfall of Bao Dai enhanced the national cause and boosted President Diem's stature as a strong leader opposed to Ho Chi Minh. South Vietnam needed his leadership to become a viable nation. Mr. Diem's ascendency carried with it the significance of upholding nationalist beliefs, a severance of ties with the foreign-dominated past and complete secession from North Vietnam.

President Diem's successes had been much applauded. Only one year after assuming power as a handicapped Prime Minister trying to govern a war-torn and troubled country in the name of an absentee chief of state, he had emerged as President of a sovereign and orderly Republic. In conjunction with its efforts to regain sovereign powers and establish political stability, the Diem Administration also carried out several programs to strengthen national authority and control.

The 1954 Geneva Agreement had seen most Viet Minh forces and some of their ardent sympathizers regroup to North Vietnam. Simultaneously

with efforts to eliminate rebellious sects, the South Vietnamese Army launched a series of operations to take over areas formerly under Viet Minh control such as Ca Mau, Xuyen Moc, Binh Dinh and Quang Ngai. Accompanying military forces were psychological warfare, medical, and civil action teams that endeavored to help the people and win their allegiance to the national cause.

With U.S. assistance, South Vietnamse armed forces began training and reorganizing. The Army formed infantry divisions which were trained and equipped to face open aggression from Communist North Vietnam. To meet the threat of insurgency from within, auxiliary and local forces were organized into the Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps. To control Communist subversion and clandestine operations, a police and security network, including special security forces such as the Special Action Teams, was put into operation.

Emerging from difficult circumstances and responsible for a nation that was constantly facing a serious threat from the North, the South Vietnamese government was pursuing a twofold objective: to develop the national cause and to strengthen national defense. As part of his effort to promote the national cause after the Republic was formed, President Diem initiated the process of democratizing the nation. However, developing the strength for effective national defense was given the most emphasis and became the underlying principle of all national programs. The requirement for survival prevailed over all other considerations during the First Republic. This need to remain secure from the North Vietnamese threat became apparent in every program from information, propaganda and organization of the masses to the resettlement of refugees and economic and social development. Preoccupation with internal security and the survival of the regime eventually led President Diem to consolidate his own powers, despite the nation's democratic outlook. His centralization of authority and rigid leadership effectively made him an authoritarian ruler, a fact that dissatisfied nationalist factions and to which the United States took exception.

As part of the democratization process, five months after the birth of the Republic, a Constitutional Assembly was elected on 4 March 1956. Towards the end of 1956, on the first birthday of the young Republic,

the Constitution of the Republic of Vietnam was proclaimed. This constitution lay the foundation for a Presidential system of government which instituted direct popular vote for the Presidency and gave the Executive branch more powers than the legislative or Judiciary. In due course, two Presidential elections were held, one in 1957 and the other in 1961, as well as two parliamentary elections in 1959 and 1963, with the Constitutional Assembly serving beyond its intended term.

Whether President Diem's political development process was flawed and whether one lauded or slighted his accomplishments was a matter of personal opinion. Most conceded, however, that his administration had at least brought about stability and a measure of law and order. This was essential not only to carry out the struggle against the Communists but also to reconstruct a country whose economy had been ravaged by war and whose political forces were immature, complex, and divided.

National reconstruction and economic development programs received a great deal of attention. With American assistance, North Vietnamese refugees and displaced persons in the South had been resettled or returned to their home villages within two years, 1955 and 1956. Several resettlement areas such as Cai San and Ho Noi, and pioneer farming projects began to prosper. Roads and bridges were rebuilt; the railroad link from Saigon to Quang Tri was reopened. The production of rice and other crops, cattle raising, and fishing were rapidly increasing. Rice production rose from 2.6 million metric tons in 1954 to 5 million tons in 1959 and rubber production from 51,000 to 79,000 tons during the same period. In 1960 South Vietnam was exporting 70,000 metric tons of rubber and 340,000 metric tons of rice.

A base was also laid for industrial development. In this connection, the South Vietnamese government had decided to cooperate with the private sector in order to stimulate and control development. Many small firms, therefore, proliferated and larger industries were founded as joint government-private ventures. Two industrial zones, the Saigon-Bien Hoa complex and the Nong Son-An Hoa area in Quang Nam Province, began to grow and expand. Vietnamese industry started producing textiles, sugar, glass, medicines, cement, and other consumer goods.

Building economic strength was pursued in conjunction with social progress in every aspect. Public health and education developed rapidly. The student population rose from 400,000 in 1956 to 1,500,000 in 1960 a near fourfold increase. In addition to the University of Saigon, two other universities, Hue and Dalat, were founded to promote higher education.

Embedded in most development programs was the underlying concern for national security. The resettlement and development patterns from 1955 to 1958 reflected the GVN plans to control insecure and remote border areas through farming projects, the building of pioneer roads and canals, and the creation of new provincial capitals and district towns. In addition to study projects in the Truong Son Cordillera, the GVN also devoted efforts to enlisting the cooperation of Montagnards and organizing the people elsewhere. When the Communists began their terrorist offensive, the GVN response was the agroville program. As Communist guerrilla warfare intensified, a large-scale pacification effort called the strategic hamlet program was initiated in 1961 and actively pursued during 1962.

Toward the middle of 1963, while the strategic hamlet program was showing signs of success in checking the growth of Communist insurgency in the rural areas, an urban religious crisis eventually led to the coup d'etat of 1 November 1963. President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother-counselor Ngo Dinh Nhu, who masterminded several important programs, were killed. With the collapse of the First Republic went most of the accomplishments of the past nine years in the areas of nation-building and developing the strength to fight against Communism. The strategic hamlet program, which was at the core of the defense effort, met its rapid demise when members of the main rural defense force, the Republican Youth, hastily deserted their ranks for fear of reprisals because of their association with the fallen regime. The new leaders, meanwhile, had yet to conceive an alternate plan for the defense of the rural areas.

The death of President Diem ushered in an era of political instability in South Vietnam. Civilian and military governments surfaced and disappeared in rapid succession while religious and political groups jockeyed for power. Military leaders in the armed forces were affected

by the national strife and became factional. Political disturbance and power struggles seemed to tear the fabric of South Vietnamese society. Taking advantage of this situation, North Vietnam stepped up its subversive efforts and infiltrated regular forces to join in the fight. From all indications, South Vietnam seemed ready to fall prey to a Communist military victory. This desperate situation compelled the United States to bomb North Vietnam and send troops to fight in South Vietnam in 1965.

With U.S. forces on South Vietnamese battlefields, the situation began to improve. After a long period of turmoil and factional bickerings, by June 1965, Lt. General Nguyen Van Thieu and Major General Nguyen Cao Ky had emerged at the head of a government dedicated to stabilization and progress.

About a year later, the same militant Buddhist group that had precipitated the events leading to President Diem's downfall began to demand a return to civilian rule. Under U.S. pressure, the military government decided upon a new course toward democracy. Avoiding the tight centralization of powers that had prevailed during the First Republic, the government broadened its base to include political parties and religious groups and instituted elections at the rice-roots level. But it seemed that to legitimize its existence, the new government also needed to be confirmed through general elections.

In September 1966, therefore, a Constitutional Assembly, the second one to date was elected. After the promulgation of a new constitution, a presidential election was conducted on 3 September 1967. The Nguyen Van Thieu-Nguyen Cao Ky ticket, which represented the military, won by a slight margin. These elections conferred a measure of legitimacy to the South Vietnamese government despite its military affiliation. Evidently religious groups and political parties had yet to prove themselves and in the situation of South Vietnam at that time, it appeared that the military was the only cohesive force capable of conducting the war against the Communists and establishing internal stability at the same time.

Concurrently, the United States continued to increase its military involvement and the situation was steadily improving with the expansion of the RVNAF and concerted pacification efforts. In the midst of

optimism and high expectations, the 1968 Tet General Offensive came as a rude awakening to the urban people of South Vietnam. Towns and cities that had been spared previously of war hazards were suddenly engulfed. Realizing the far greater danger of a Communist victory, city people began to shelter differences in opinion and join in the war effort by enlisting in the military service or serving in People's Self-Defense Forces.

South Vietnam in the aftermath of the Communist military defeat during 1968 displayed all the signs of restored confidence and renewed vitality. Spurred on by increased popular allegiance to the national cause, the GVN pushed vigorously ahead with the rural pacification and development program which soon brought the near totality of hamlets and their population under governmental control. The national economy rapidly recovered with increased rice production and the influx of larger U.S. aid. Although inflation continued to boost consumer prices, its pressure seemed to ease on the rural peasantry. The prospects for the future never seemed so promising especially after the distribution of free farmland to the landless peasants under the 1970 agrarian reform.

All this progress was interrupted by the Communist 1972 Easter Offensive which, despite its furor and destruction, failed to subdue South Vietnam. Nevertheless, the nation began to doubt its capability of survival without U.S. support. The Paris Agrement of January 1973 reinforced this doubt when South Vietnam was left to fend for itself alone. With all U.S. combat troops now gone and U.S. aid reduced, South Vietnamese felt vulnerable and less and less reassured of their chance of survival. In the midst of these difficult times, South Vietnamese society, which had never been united in the anti-Communist struggle, was sinking deeper into division and selfishness. Internal strife and the threat of collapse were also aggravating. The authority of government and national leaders as well as popular faith sank to an all-time low. It was no longer possible to mobilize the masses, and the survival strength of South Vietnam was visibly on the decline with each new Communist attack.

Motivation of the People

The world-wide struggle against Communism, perhaps more than any other form of conflict, has pointed up the vital role of the people. The 1917 victory of the Russian Boloheviks depended mostly on techniques of mobilizing the masses. Mao Tse Tung's success in 1949 came only after the Chinese people had lost faith in the Nationalists and because the Communists had been able to gain control of the majority of the populace. In Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh's victory in the 1945-54 war against the French again seemed to demonstrate the merits of "people's war" which the Communists are still boasting.

The Vietnamese Communists claimed that their struggle in South Vietnam was based on the power of the people. In this strategy of subversion, therefore, politics was the basis for every action. Of necessity, military action was subordinated to political needs or used to exploit political gains. Violence was the means to reach political objectives.

As Hanoi's leaders saw it, people's war had three characteristics. First, it was a war waged by the entire people. In fact, the people were manipulated, exhorted, and deceived into joining the war effort. Since the people provided manpower and material resources, as the war grew in intensity, the Communists were able to sustain greater losses only through a merciless manipulation of the masses. Second, it was a total war, waged in every field of endeavor. But carrying the fight into all domains certainly created enormous difficulties for our enemy. Finally, because it depended so much on the people to grow and expand, it had to be a protracted war. Obviously, people could be organized and controlled only gradually and our enemy needed time to overcome the many problems occasioned by the war.

During the Vietnam War, therefore, winning the hearts and minds of the people was just as essential for the GVN as maintaining security. In practice, these two objectives were meshed together in many cases, and their pursuit overshadowed the purely economic development effort. All nationalist governments from Mr. Diem to Mr. Thieu were aware of the necessity to win the support of the people. It was obvious that

with the people on our side we could create our own strength and drain the enemy's, by denying him the use of manpower and other resources. This would also provide the opportunity to establish our ears and eyes among the masses. From a military point of view, this was vital for the safeguard of national security and the establishments of an effective territorial control system, a major problem in counter-insurgency warfare.

But winning the sympathy of the people alone was not enough. The problem was how to motivate the masses to join in the fight against the Communists, directly or indirectly. This motivation challenge was both complex and difficult; it had been addressed by successive governments in South Vietnam.

The struggle on this front had many facets. The war was first and foremost an ideological conflict between Nationalists and Communists. To the people of South Vietnam, however, the Communists presented a nationalistic front: their cause was to fight for democracy, peace, and neutrality. They never mentioned communism or socialism; to their middle and high-level cadres, communist ideology was something taken for granted.

From the beginning of the conflict, the Nationalists had felt that need for an ideology of their own to light their path and serve as a basis for all of their programs. To meet this need and provide a doctrinal basis for the regime, the First Republic propounded the Personalist doctrine as an antidote to communism.

According to Mr. Ngo Dinh Nhu who developed this doctrine, Personalism was a blend of Western and Eastern philosophies designed for the total development of the individual in Vietnam's communal-type democracy. Personalism fostered the development of the individual, morally, spiritually, and physically in harmony with social needs of the community and as a step towards building the nation's political life. Each individual was to cultivate himself as a contribution to building society as a whole. Human rights and human dignity derived from hard work, and it was through work that democracy and freedom would be achieved. The advocates of personalism hoped to build a

balanced democracy in which law and order would reign; they rejected both the excessive libertarianism of western bourgeois democracies and the restrictions and deceit of Communism.

After the fall of the First Republic and with it, the demise of personalism, subsequent nationalist governments advanced no other doctrines. In general, they espoused an uncompromising anti-Communist stance embedded in a vague nationalistic ideal. This ideal was to build a free and democratic society as opposed to human enslavement and regimentation under the control of international Communism.

To inculcate this ideal on the people, the GVN used all information media such as radio, TV, the performing arts, the press, posters and banners, announcements, notices, directives, and study groups. Depending on the requirements of each period, certain topics of information received the most comprehensive media coverage.

Two original forms of publicizing our ideal and neutralizing enemy propaganda were the Communist Denunciation Campaign and the study program. The Communist Denunciation Campaign followed immediately in the wake of the refugee exodus from North Vietnam. Understandably, it was emphasized for two years, until the end of 1956, and then was made a permanent study program. During that period, denouncing Communism took place throughout South Vietnam, in villages, hamlets, schools, government offices, military units, or private groups. In each meeting a speaker would present facts about the Communist doctrine and the subterfuges and crimes of the Communists. Sometimes a Communist defector was used to denounce Communist atrocities. As a result of this campaign in which the people actively tracked down underground Communist cadres, a large number of these cadres were arrested, and many documents, weapons and military supplies kept in caches were seized. In larger urban centers such as Saigon or provincial capitals, frequent anti-Communist mass rallies were held. In Saigon, for example, the Communist denunciation rally of February 1956 was attended by hundreds of thousands. In these rallies, speeches denouncing the Communists were frequently followed by confessions of Communist defectors, who expressed their penitence, burned the Communist flag, and took the oath of allegiance to the Nationalist government. These simplistic denunciations of

Communism probably had little effect on the intelligentsia, but from all indications, their impact on the popular masses was significant.

After 1957, the Anti-Communist Denunciation Campaign gave way to the Study Campaign. Radio broadcasts disseminated the logic and position of the government, and information teams carried the contents of these broadcasts into villages with public address systems. Every government office or military unit organized its own study sessions using materials prepared by the Ministry of Information or by the Psychological Warfare Directorate. In each session there was a lecture followed by discussion and a period devoted to questions and answers. The results of these periodic study sessions depended on the ability of the speaker as well as on the interest level of the topic. When they were established as routine, however, study sessions became boring and less frequently held, especially under the Second Republic. In many instances, performing art programs were introduced at study meetings to attract audiences; frequently the entertainment lasted much longer than the study session.

The information process designed to disseminate information for each administration went a step further by controlling and shutting out ideas and printed materials deemed detrimental to the official anti-Communist posture. For that reason every nationalist government endeavored, by one way or another to control the press and printed matter, which, to Western democracies, was a violation of the freedom of thought. But faced with an enemy who was a master of propaganda and deceit, the GVN seemed to have no choice since a straightforward implementation of the freedom of the press would amount to yielding an important advantage to the enemy. Communist propaganda agents would then easily infiltrate the free press and influence our writers who were usually impatient with restraints. Therefore, the requirements of the anti-Communist fight and the freedom of thought and of the press had to be weighed against each other in the context of South Vietnam.

Mobilizing the people also involved the regime's keen competition for stature with the masses. Although propounding the nationalist ideal contributed something to the cause of the regime, it was far more important to decry the prestige that the Communists were enjoying with large segments of the population because of their leadership role in the

resistance against the French. For all its success, the campaign to denounce Communism and study its crimes was certainly not sufficient to confer a measure of legitimacy to the South Vietnamese regime.

To achieve this legitimacy, the First Republic took several actions. First, the feudalistic armed religious sects had to be put down. Then ex-Emperor Bao Dai had to be deposed as the symbol of a French-controlled puppet regime. But as long as the French High Commissioner and the French Expeditionary corps were present, the South Vietnamese people could not feel that the regime had changed. It was necessary therefore to remove the French presence to show that the regime was truly independent. Once the French had been expelled, the South Vietnamese government had also to prove that it was not overly influenced by U.S. advisors. Otherwise, the people would think that it was only a change of masters because the Communists never ceased to denounce our successive governments as American puppets. Though silent and passive, most Vietnamese people in the rural areas were extremely sensitive; from years of suffering under foreign domination they were naturally determined not to be slaves to foreigners. This was an important psychological fact to be heeded by any viable regime in Vietnam.

The competition for stature was epitomized in the persons of the leaders themselves. Centuries of monarchical rule and Confucian tradition conditioned Vietnamese to believe that patriotism was personal loyalty to the emperor. With that kind of mentality, a president of the new republic was not much different from an emperor of former times. Since partitioned Vietnam had two presidents, it was a matter of course that competition for the people's allegiance was strong between them. Ho Chi Minh had been deified by both the Communist and several Western scholars. Ngo Dinh Diem of South Vietnam, too, emerged as a leader of equal stature, perhaps Ho's most respected opponent. Propaganda had made both leaders appear to have a good origin, high achievements, talent, and moral excellence. So, if Ho Chi Minh's portrait was hung everywhere in Communist-controlled areas, Ngo Dinh Diem's pictures, too, had to be present in every home and government office in Nationalist-controlled areas. Despite his isolation, President Diem was revered by the rural people. After his assassination, no other South Vietnamese leader was

ever again to enjoy the same prestige. For its part, North Vietnam continued to cling to "Uncle Ho's" image and, after his death, to his testament.

International standing was also part of national prestige. During the difficult and initial period when it had to place its house in order, the First Republic had been slow in cultivating foreign relations. It was not until 1958 that President Diem set about to win international sympathy and support. His success could be attributed to the immense prestige he enjoyed at home. South Vietnam quickly established relations with other nations of Asia and Africa. Then the Indian President and the Malaysian Prime Minister paid visits to Saigon. In contrast the Second Republic did not accomplish much in the area of foreign relations; its leader suffered from low popular esteem as a result.

Next there was the need to display national vitality, the ability to survive, and real strength. For North Vietnam, which had defeated the French and signed the Geneva Agreements, which called for reunification through general elections in two years, there was perhaps no need to prove its strength although this strength was constantly publicized. In addition North Vietnamese propaganda never failed to boast about the assistance and support that it received from the Communist "brother" countries. For South Vietnam which had nothing to its credit, the need to prove its strength was much more pressing. This strength should be demonstrated through the ability to survive, which the people had not fully perceived. It was necessary, therefore, to bring unity to nationalist forces and to reorganize and develop the armed forces. It was necessary to launch military operations, promote the pacification effort, set up military installations, and pioneer new lands as signs of permanent presence and settlement. Ceremonies and military parades conducted with a great deal of fanfare were also useful from the psychological point of view.

Showing off U.S. support, however, was a more delicate affair. President Diem's administration took great pains keeping this support in low profile so that it would not diminish national prestige in the eyes of the people. The Second Republic, with far less prestige, never hesitated to play up American support, perhaps to compensate for the lack of personal stature of its leaders.

Another form of competition for popular support, which also proved the most effective, was the devotion to serve the people. In this regard the GVN sometimes seemed to go out of its way, because in South Vietnam winning the support of the people meant the survival not only of the government but of the country as well. Competition with the North demanded that every South Vietnamese government from 1954 to 1975 did its best to insure a standard of living for its people higher than that enjoyed by the North. Owing to U.S. aid and a larger cultivated area, the South always far out distanced the North in this regard.

The rivalry in this area was translated into efforts of national development. Economic plans to include the building of an economic infrastructure were studied and implemented. During the First Republic, no sooner had the refugees been resettled than an effort was made to restore agricultural production to the pre-war level concurrently with plans to set up an industrial base. The Second Republic, which enjoyed greatly expanded American aid and the influx of allied troops, witnessed the extensive construction of roads, bridges, airports, and seaports, both new and renovated, and a modern telecommunications system. During this period towns and cities exhibited an appearance of affluence due primarily to a totally free import program. But this affluence was achieved at the expense of domestic industries.

In the efforts to better serve the people perhaps the key problem was to forge a corps of devoted civil servants and cadres and a military force that was friendly to the people. This was vital because the masses at the rice-roots level often judged their government through daily contacts with low-level, local officials. The First Republic had the advantage of a relatively secure situation which facilitated the conduct of normal governmental business. However, intensive war made it much more difficult for the Second Republic. President Diem also had the additional advantage of controlling a vast network of informers through the National Revolutionary movement, the Republican Youth, and especially the Can Lao Party. That tight control of local governments inspired respect for law, order and discipline and prevented the straying of officials at all levels. After his rule, though government officials knew they should serve the people whole-heartedly, there was much less

incentive to resist temptations, especially in the face of a rising cost of living. If there were some relatively bright periods, they were due more to the security situation, the balance of forces, an active pacification program, and the productivity of the rural areas than to the accomplishments of our civil servants.

The behavior of RVNAF soldiers in military operations or in bivouacs near or in populated areas was extremely important. But the GVN never seemed able to train its soldiers properly in proselyting tactics; only a few well-led units could maintain good discipline. Under the First Republic there was tighter control in the field. During later periods, when the war had escalated and the armed forces greatly expanded, small unit commanders in general were lax in maintaining discipline. As a result the people really feared military operations. This was a serious weakness which was never satisfactorily corrected over the years.

Because the great majority of South Vietnamese lived in rural areas, rural policies were extremely important. For several years the Communists had raised the countryside to the level of a "key strategic area," and waged a kind of insurgency warfare whose strategy was to "use the countryside to surround and isolate the cities." They employed every technique to gain control gradually over the countryside, turning many places into areas of endless contest.

Under the First Republic an effort was made to reorganize village administration in order to achieve direct government control through province chiefs. Although this policy ran counter to tradition, it met with no resistance. After long years of war peasants returned to their home villages to work their land, and production rapidly rose. Economic recovery slowly but effectively moved ahead. The government also selected large areas in the hinterland for development and built roads and canals. In 1959, when the security situation was becoming more difficult, President Diem responded by launching the Agroville program designed to bring to the rural areas security and some comforts of city life. The program had just been initiated when guerrilla war broke out. The First Republic responded with the Strategic Hamlet program designed to maintain control and consolidate the vital rural areas.

During the Second Republic rural development was elevated to a national strategy. Peasants received assistance and care. Wherever security was established there appeared schools, dispensaries, information halls, and tractors. Agricultural extension programs such as the utilization of new seeds and fertilizers, improvement of animal husbandry methods brought new prosperity to the peasants.

Of prime importance in the rural policy was the land reform program. This reform was desirable since approximately two-thirds of the peasants in the Mekong Delta had no land to work. During the resistance war most landowners had left for the cities; now that peace had come they returned to reclaim their land and collect rents. With landowners determined to repossess their lands, the problem threatened to degenerate into a grave social conflict if the government did not intervene and resolve the problem.

The First Republic adopted a middle-of-the-road solution. Landowners with more than 100 hectares of farmland were forced to dispose of it. Tenants were allowed to purchase that land at a low cost and to relay it over a period of six years. Hesitant and limited, this land reform program was not very successful.

Under the Second Republic the land reform program was pursued more vigorously, and on a much larger scale. The "Land to The Tiller" program, implemented in 1970, was an instant success because of U.S. financial assistance. Termed revolutionary even by socialist standards, this program was probably the greatest success of the Nguyen Van Thieu government. With improved security the land reform program of 1970 brought about a new life to South Vietnam's countryside.

The South Vietnamese countryside also included the vast highlands with mountains and jungles which the Communists used as stepping stones to invade South Vietnam. Living scattered in this area were over 30 ethnic Montagnard tribes. President Diem personally devoted considerable attention to the highlands, which he often visited. He had contact with the hill tribes and promised them government assistance. Ethnic schools were opened in which tribal languages were taught in addition to Vietnamese. The First Republic also exploited forest resources and set up land development areas in the highlands. But the influx of Vietnamese

lowlanders did not please the Montagnards very much. After a brief disorder caused by the FULRO, a rebellious Montagnard organization in 1964-65, the Second Republic treated the Montagnards with greater generosity. A new cabinet-level agency, the Ministry of Ethnic Development, was created to handle ethnic affairs. Montagnard military personnel and civil servants received greater consideration for appointment and promotion. Still, primarily because of Communist influence-buying propaganda, the ethnic problem was never completely solved.

Another technique of mobilizing the people was selecting the proper form of organization for the population. The enemy initiated several organizations, both overt and covert, to regiment the people. The GVN also placed great emphasis on this problem with the objective of rallying popular support for the war effort.

As early as 1955 the Ngo Dinh Diem government had embarked on popular mobilization through the National Revolutionary Movement. This movement quickly spread over the entire nation; it was a popular organization with local chapters at all levels. In provincial capitals and cities, there were chapters for every block, ward, quarter, and school district. These organizations took part in study sessions and held anti-Communist denunciation or other mass rallies directed by the government. In the civil service there was the League of National Revolutionary Civil Servants which, through its upperhanded operations, involved every government employee in study sessions and drastically changed the traditional apathy to which civil servants had been accustomed under French rule. This large-scale mobilization of the masses eventually gave the government the capability of massing popular support for other important tasks.

About 1959, led by Mme Ngo Dinh Nhu, the women's group within the National Revolutionary Movement grew into a new organization called the Women's Solidarity Movement. This organization played a leading role in charity work and visits to military installations, roles that were later taken over by the Young Republican Women's Association.

After several years of interruption similar popular organizations were revived under the Rural Development program in 1966. Rural Development Cadre teams, which were essentially improved versions of the Civil Action teams under the First Republic, took charge of developing various

types of groups. These included organizations for women, senior citizens, boys and girls, and self-defense teams.

In a war situation, however, popular mobilization was successful only if the people could be motivated to take an active part in the defense of their homes and neighborhoods. On the pattern of the self-defense organization or people's militia of 1945-54 the First Republic had initially established village defense groups. By the time strategic hamlets came into being these village defense groups had grown in size and became known as Young Republican Men. Distinguished by the mechanic's blue uniform of its members, the Young Republican Men's organization had offices in all towns and cities and were placed under the overall command of Mr. Ngo Dinh Nhu. By 1963 the membership of this organization totaled over one million who had received military training and part of whom had been armed. Besides the Young Republican Men, there were the Young Republican Women and groups of civil servants who had undergone paramilitary training and were armed and given guard duty at government offices.

During 1964-65 the Nguyen Khanh government organized the Fighting Youth in villages and Civil Defense teams in towns and cities. While Fighting Youth members were armed for self-defense in rural areas, the Civil Defense was essentially an organization of civil servants and urban dwellers who took action only in case of disorder or disaster.

Under the Second Republic, especially after the 1968 Tet Offensive, self-defense forces went through a period of great expansion and became known as People's Self-Defense Forces (PSDF). In many places local people volunteered for duty and requested weapons to defend themselves against the Communists. By 1970 the PSDF included four million members, of which one million were combatants equipped with 400,000 individual weapons. This was a considerable force. In many areas PSDF members had fought gallantly and sustained casualties under enemy attack.

Finally, apart from the effort to mobilize the masses as a political power base, a fighting force, and as an effective way to undermine the enemy's strength, nationalist governments under the First and Second Republic also attempted to set up a government's party. Mr. Ngo Dinh Nhu, President Diem's political advisor, had founded the Can Lao Nhan Vi Party which was destined to play the vanguard role of national revolution.

The Can Lao Party began to grow as soon as Mr. Diem assumed powers in 1954; its membership was recruited discreetly. The Party never operated overtly, had no official headquarters, and held no rallies. It seemed as if the Can Lao Party had served only as the eyes and ears of the leaders in power; therefore, it never had the official status of a political party. Under the Second Republic President Nguyen Van Thieu founded the Democratic Party in 1971. The Party was hastily put together by a massive recruitment effort, carried out primarily by some cabinet ministers and province chiefs. The Party made its first public appearance in Saigon and operated as the party of the government in power. But the low standing of the government, the opposition of other nationalist parties, and popular apathy had an adverse impact on the status of the Democratic Party.

Motivating the people to join the fight against the Communists was an absolute requirement but it was difficult to achieve. To be successful the regime had to be trusted by the people. It should have a just cause, prestige, and attractive qualities. It should also be able to convince the people, through its achievements, that it was worthy of their sacrifices.

President Diem had personal prestige and moral rectitude, the qualities of a good leader. He had devoted all of his efforts to build the nation and motivate the people. Some of his collaborators, however, had committed errors that plunged the nation into chaos and led to the collapse of the regime. Suffering from a lack of prestige and unable to solve internal problems and mobilize the masses to join in the anti-Communist struggle, subsequent governments came to depend heavily on the United States. The advent of U.S. participation in the war brought about far-reaching consequences which affected the entire fabric of South Vietnamese society.

CHAPTER III

American Influence on South Vietnamese Society

Significant Contrasts

The Indochinese conflict brought together the Republic of Vietnam and the United States. Although this marriage of convenience was dictated by a common purpose -- to contain Communist expansion and especially North Vietnam's attempt to annex the South -- the alliance brought to the surface certain basic incompabilities between the two nations. As Kipling had observed, "West is West, and East is East, and the twain shall never meet," it was inevitable that differences could be expected. Vietnam and the U.S. were so dissimilar in origins, background, civilization, and environment that they stood at the very antipodes of the human spectrum. Such differences could only be mitigated or ignored but never totally nullified. In former times the Chinese had devoted many years to come to sociable terms with Vietnam, yet they never succeeded in reconciling all the differences. It was obvious that time was the essential ingredient to bring about mutual understanding and a harmonious working relationship.

In 1954 South Vietnamse had only a sketchy knowledge but generally favorable opinion of the United States. In the eyes of South Vietnamese at that time the United States was like a magic rope to cling to in order to escape from the extremely dangerous quicksand in which they had found themselves. Most educated urban Vietnamese saw the United States as the epitome of democracy, the most affluent and modern nation on earth, a world power without colonial ambitions and whose assistance to other nations under the Marshall Plan was universally applauded, and finally as a staunchly anti-Communist friend that bore the major brunt in the Korean conflict during 1950-1953. To rural South Vietnamese,

however, the United States was a total stranger. Later when the United States entered the war some rural people regarded it, through the refracting prism of Communist propaganda, as an aggressor. However, most submitted to the urban view that the Americans had come as friends.

In addition to this very general perception of the United States, very few Vietnamese had a chance to know Americans as individuals. Initially, therefore, Vietnamese who had to deal with Americans made use of their experience with the French in maintaining a relationship. For their part, except for those who had some connection with the Vietnam war, the majority of the American people probably knew little about Vietnam. Those who did acquired their knowledge mostly from books on Vietnam written by French and American authors. The advantage conferred by this knowledge was that the general information on the Vietnamese people and their ways and customs helped the Americans to overcome the awkwardness they might have felt in their first contacts with the Vietnamese. But there was a disadvantage in that the superficial or biased observations of Western, especially French, writers had seemed to perpetuate a body of erroneous preconceived ideas about the Vietnamese people and Vietnamese society.

Most Americans came to Vietnam on a one-year tour of duty. Others, who had extended or additional tours, seldom paid attention to the true character of the people with whom they had contact and of the society among which they lived; with a few exceptions and because of their assignments or duties, they rarely concerned themselves with the inherent differences between the two peoples.

A fundamental and most important difference between the two partners during the war was in the concept of time and action. While Americans regarded action as a compulsion and something to be performed aggressively in the shortest possible time, Vietnamese seemed to view time as an eternal commodity, an ingredient of the panacea to all problems. For this reason, inaction in the immediate present might be a form of action and was acceptable; it did not mean laziness, evasion, or passivity, but merely implied waiting for an opportune moment to act.

Vietnamese differed from Americans in the way they solved a problem. While the Americans often arrived at an optimum solution, the Vietnamese usually preferred a multiple approach. This inclination was a trait of the Vietnamese character which probably originated from Buddhist and Confucian influence. Buddha taught us that there is not just one buddha -- the Enlightened One -- but anyone following the right path can work toward his own enlightenment as a buddha. Confucius taught us to use the golden mean in our daily life. According to him things are never slanted to one side and are subject to change by the natural order. Thus, the right attitude to adopt is toward the middle of every issue. The experience of Vietnam with its numerous vicissitudes, its changes of dynasties, its political misfortunes of the 19th and 20th centuries had probably reinforced among Vietnamese the predilection for a multiple approach to solving problems. This occasionally caused unwitting Americans, especially American advisors, to criticize their Vietnamese counterparts for their indecisiveness, their lack of dynamism and drive.

Family attachment of the Vietnamese was known to Americans, but this loyalty as well as the extended family obligations were sometimes beyond American comprehension. Vietnamese society had always been a restricted community. The nuclear family always lay within the limits of the extended family. When members of the extended family got married, loyalty to the extended family was further expanded to encompass the new nuclear families. Thus it was that in human relations feelings normally took precedence over reason among Vietnamese, and though many Vietnamese realized this as being a weakness it was not easily overcome. Unlike Americans, Vietnamese gave little heed to social organizations and seldom regarded social activities as part of the individual's life, the exception being North Vietnamese Communists. No political parties in South Vietnam could be ranked among U.S. parties in terms of the role they played in the lives of their members. The relation between the people and the national leader in Vietnam was also different from what it is in the United States. While Americans make a distinction between the person of the President and his office, Vietnamese tended to regard the two as being inseparable. Such an attitude must have begun in feudal times,

when "being loyal to the king is being loyal to the country," and was fostered by every South Vietnamese leader. These leaders identified themselves with the regimes they were leading so that loyalty to the person of the leader was the only way to be loyal to the political establishment.

The disastrous offshoot of this attitude was that anyone who made positive contributions to the system, the government, or the head of an official organization, was regarded as a loyalist, and anyone who did not cooperate was regarded as a member of the opposition.

Another difference between Vietnamese and Americans was perhaps most significant since it concerned the general attitude toward the war. With the war lasting almost continuously since 1946 most Vietnamese, though considering it a scourge, had come to regard it as part of their lives. Many considered peace and the end of all hostilities as wishful thinking and thus reconciled themselves to living with it. This attitude led many Americans to criticize Vietnamese for negativism, flinching resolve, and defeatism.

Important as these differences were, not all Americans fully recognized them, which resulted in misunderstanding and lost opportunities to bridge the gap when cooperation was at stake.

Major Objectives and their Impact

Throughout its association with Vietnam, the United States had three primary objectives: to assist South Vietnam in building adequate strength to resist aggression by North Vietnam, to help South Vietnam build a democratic state and, to help South Vietnam develop its economy. Each of these major areas of interest had an impact on South Vietnamese society.

These objectives were indicated by President Eisenhower when he wrote to Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem in 1954: "The purpose of this offer is to assist the government of South Vietnam in developing and maintaining a strong viable state, capable of resisting attempted subversion or

aggression through military means."[1]

The military might of U.S. forces was the subject of great admiration among South Vietnamese when the United States was victorious at the end of World War II and subsequently fought Red China and North Korea to a standstill during the Korean War. Providing military aid to South Vietnam in 1954, the United States was using its war experience in helping reorganize the Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces. The United States then advocated building a regular army of about 120,000 men capable of resisting North Vietnam's aggressive designs which were presumed to materialize under the form of an invasion. Carrying over the strategic thinking developed during the Korean conflict, the United States envisioned the RVNAF as just having limited resistance capability. In case of invasion, their role was to fight a delaying action pending the intervention of SEATO forces. However, this position on the total size and requirements of our armed forces was destined to change drastically as Communist objectives and plans were surfaced.

The commitment of U.S. forces into the war in 1965 provided South Vietnamese civilian and military leaders with new hope. American modern equipment, superior firepower, and scientific and technological knowledge as applied to the war effort nurtured South Vietnam's expectations for a strong military machine similar to that of the United States at some future time. The excellent staff work, organization, and operation of U.S. forces, as exemplified in staff briefings replete with carefully researched data and captivating presentation techniques, had never failed to fascinate Vietnamese military leaders.

The tendency to pattern the RVNAF organization and tactics after the U.S. model was reinforced in combat operations in which Vietnamese forces, whether operating separately or in concert with U.S. forces,

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[1] Department of State Bulletin Nov. 15, 1954, pp. 735-736.

gradually acquired the habits of a rich man's army, giving weight to materiel and firepower and substituting firepower for manpower. This imitation of U.S. organization and operation involved a number of important problems which hardly anyone noticed at the time. Being a nation with immense resources, the United States could afford a modern and expensive defense establishment. But the small and impoverished RVN and its society could maintain a strong military force and fight the war along U.S. lines only with prolonged American aid. Furthermore, while being obsessed with modeling themselves after the U.S. forces and employing U.S. military doctrine and tactics, the RVNAF were unwittingly neglecting their own experience in counter-insurgency warfare, their anti-guerrilla techniques, and their knowledge of the enemy, which were the advantages accruing only to an indigenous army and which U.S. conventional forces could not have enjoyed to the same degree.

This United States objective of helping the RVN develop adequate strength to resist aggression gradually influenced several changes at all echelons in our society. As U.S. military presence phased out, RVNAF authorized strength reached over one million personnel. Almost every family had one or more of its immediate members in uniform often serving considerable distances from their homes for extended periods. This interference with our long established routine of daily life was felt by entire family groups.

This great expansion also produced many technicians and specialists to meet military requirements. However, as years evolved some were released from the Armed Forces because of wounds, age or other health problems. This category of personnel would usually seek employment in their areas of speciality resulting in more families moving into urban areas or locations where employment was available.

A most significant impact on South Vietnamese society, however, was the drain on our total manpower caused by the expansion of our armed forces. This had a direct effect on our communities, collective activities and interests, standards of living, conduct and organized patterns of normal life.

During the process of helping the RVN build adequate military strength, the massive military presence of the United States in South

Vietnam had a disadvantage in that it usually eclipsed the role of the RVNAF. The U.S. military presence naturally attracted the attention of the foreign and especially the U.S. press. Reports on the war were heavily documented in terms of U.S. performance and enemy activities. Conspicuously, most RVNAF activities were left out of news coverage, and when reported on a few occasions, the slant was invariably directed against their shortcomings or worse.

This pattern, which was repeated over and over again, was a constant irritation to RVNAF leaders and infused doubts in the minds of those military men who were suffering from a feeling of inadequacy. It even caused some people of South Vietnam to believe that the RVNAF were incapable of protecting them. As for the enemy, he stood to gain by the reports of the foreign press that unwittingly seemed to be extolling Communist exploits. This unfortunate condition contributed to the complete collapse of faith among RVNAF ranks and throughout our society in general at a time when U.S. aid and apparent interest was dwindling.

Assisting South Vietnam in developing a true democracy, the second objective of the United States, was emphasized in 1954 by Senator John F. Kennedy, "To assist a nation taking the first feeble step toward the complexity of a republican form of government.[2]

Building democracy in South Vietnam was therefore a national goal not only widely proclaimed by the GVN to the Vietnamese people but also publicized by the U.S. government for the American public. In time it became a yardstick that the U.S. applied in its assessment of and justification for aid to this country.

Although sharing the common desire and objective of making South Vietnam a democratic nation, the U.S. and the RVN governments did not always completely agree on how to proceed. The U.S. maintained that

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[2] American's Stake in Vietnam: Anatomy of a Conflict, by Wesley R. Fishet, F.E. Peacock Publishers, Inc., 1968, p. 143.

the establishment of a republican form of government in South Vietnam with democratic institutions and the application of individual liberties should satisfy the aspirations of the South Vietnamese and help defeat Communism. Although concurring in principle, the GVN held that, in a country being threatened by Communist subversion, democracy could not mean a total implementation of all rights and freedoms in view of the political, security, and economic situation and of the level of education of the people. To the GVN, unrestrained implementation of all freedoms would lead to an uncontrollable situation which allowed Communist elements to operate more easily by taking advantage of opportunities in the democratic system. Regardless of the approach and time required for the process leading to a true democracy, it was obvious that it would have an influence on our common traditions, institutions and eventually our society in general.

Unlike on the military front, where the GVN was almost totally aligned on the U.S. position, on the political scene the GVN always endeavored to maintain its own course when warranted by the situation. The first Constitution of the RVN, proclaimed on 26 October 1956, though patterned after the U.S. Constitution, gave broad powers to the President, which was a main feature of the French Constitution of 1946. The Constitution notwithstanding, the Diem administration did not always seem to respect it in practice. A case in point was the failure of the government to activate the Council for the Upholding of the Constitution and the Economic Council, both of which were provided for by the Constitution but were not established until six years later in spite of American pressure.

Free elections are typical of all democracies. For South Vietnam, elections had the added meaning of providing a yardstick to compare its democratic form of government with the totalitarian regime of North Vietnam, where the National Assembly, elected in 1946, was not reelected until 14 years later. The South was indeed making greater strides in holding periodic congressional and presidential elections. However, the Diem government did not want elections at the rice-roots level. A 1956 law provided for the appointment of village councils by province

chiefs upon recommendation by district chiefs and approval by the Ministry of the Interior.

One major difference between the First and the Second Republic was the extent to which the GVN yielded to American influence. The 1967 Constitution of the Second Republic no doubt bore greater affinity with the U.S. Constitution than the 1956 Constitution in that it instituted a bicameral national legislature and the Supreme Court. Village elections were also initiated in April 1967; to the United States this was a sign of progress toward true democracy.

To the majority of South Vietnamese, however, elections were not necessarily a sign of true democracy or a way to meet the wishes of the people. The South Vietnamese people, especially those in the rural areas, were in general either unfamiliar with elections or unable to grasp their meaning. They did not believe that elections would result in a better life for them, or that those elected would work for their advancement. Among urban dwellers and opposition parties there was also little faith in elections because they always suspected the government of committing fraud. They, too, did not seem to trust those elected to fight for the rights of the people. To the discontented, therefore, elections were often an opportunity to vent their frustration and opposition to the government by casting their ballots for whoever opposed the government. Hence, elections did not always serve the national cause or accurately reflect the true wishes of the people.

During our evolution toward a true democracy the coup d'etat became a popular tool of power groups. Coups become such a fearful obsession for all South Vietnamese leaders that their main effort was to prevent them by appointing close and loyal friends to sensitive posts such as the CMD, major units, military regions and armed services. Every other consideration seemed to be subordinated to this concern. The net result was a reduction in the performance level of the RVNAF since many of our major activities and units were riddled with factionalism, suspicion, and infighting and the fact that military leaders were contending for power by engaging in politics.

Since a coup was never a substitute for real authority and because popular allegiance still had to be won, the leader had to secure supporters

from his own faction and insure his own protection by placing trusted people and relatives in all key positions. Consequently, what bound these people together were primarily material incentives and shared power, not just devotion to a just cause or ideology or the welfare of South Vietnamese society.

In its third area of major interest, helping South Vietnamese develop economically, the United States without question had a direct influence on our society. This was reflected at every level from the activities of our highest institutions down to our hamlets and villages.

The U.S. and RVN agreed that a strong, viable economy was the very foundation upon which a developing nation must base its future in all other endeavors, socially, politically and militarily. For this reason the United States, at much expense to its taxpayers, applied considerable effort in helping the RVN with our economic problems; the common objective was to build a strong and independent Vietnam.

Major programs were initiated with sound objectives in vast and complex areas such as agriculture, public affairs, public health, public services and the training of a skilled labor force. This emphasis on skilled labor concurrent with the expansion of the RVNAF during Vietnamization resulted in the additional use of women, plus the old and young of both sexes. These initiatives, especially in a country long engaged in war, changed our normal standards of living, influenced our daily lives and even contributed to the separation of family members. Concurrently, as Western imports, previously considered luxury items, became available our society became more materialistic.

The fact that the value of the Vietnamese piaster was pegged to that of the American dollar had enormous consequences for South Vietnam's economy. Under the First Republic, Vietnamese authorities refused to devalue the paister as advised by the United States. Although this devaluation was meant to reestablish parity between the two currencies, its implementation would have had a profound psychological impact on the masses and was adamantly opposed by President Diem. Finally, the piaster's exchange value was allowed to float freely in relation to the U.S. dollar under the Second Republic. Additionally, no South Vietnamese

government was ever able to combat the thriving black market for the U.S. dollar, a situation that totally destabilized the piaster. And runaway inflation came along which resulted in endless spirals of price hikes.

In addition to the impacts that U.S. objectives exerted on South Vietnam militarily, politically, and economically, there was the significant imprint that U.S. aid and the U.S. presence left on South Vietnamese social life. As was true with the usual effect of Western civilization on traditional oriental life, this imprint had its good and bad marks, and both combined to change South Vietnamese society.

Social Impact of the American Presence

South Vietnamese might have differed on how and to what extent the presence of over one half of a million U.S. troops and advisers had influenced South Vietnamese society. Most agreed, however, that this presence affected primarily the urban segment and had a lesser effect on the rural people. They also agreed that the American influence was perhaps more pervasive than had been thought because among the many impacts it had created there were tangible ones in the areas of military, political, and economic endeavor as well as intangible ones, such as in cultural and social behavior.

No one could perhaps deny that the American presence was a psychological boost to South Vietnamese morale. All appeared to be convinced that as long as U.S. personnel were involved the U.S. was not about to abandon South Vietnam. South Vietnamese nationalists also felt grateful for the substantial aid and military intervention of the U.S. At the very least, this aid and intervention had saved South Vietnam from probable collapse in 1965 and helped it turn around the outcome of the war in 1968 and 1972. All this had made it possible for South Vietnam to survive until 1975.

Despite the ravages of the war, the urban society of South Vietnam seemed to thrive in prosperity. The majority of urban and certain wealthy rural people enjoyed all the amenities of modern life:

automobiles, motorcycles, air conditioners, refrigerators, television, radio, etc., which were available on a large scale only to industrially-developed Asian countries such as Japan. Most remarkably, even the ordinary working class was often able to share in what had usually been restricted to wealthy elements of society. Most urban and suburban households owned a radio receiver, and one out of ten a television set. Private transportation means such as motorcycles and bicycles were usually available for every working family, including some living in rural areas. Electricity, once confined to big cities, gradually expanded to all district towns and most of the suburbs surrounding major cities. Had it not been for enemy sabotage and war destructiveness, rural electrification could have been a reality during the 60's.

The presence of U.S. troops brought about a marked improvement in land communications. Roads were enlarged, extended, or newly built along with the rehabilitation of old bridges and the construction of new ones. This improved and extended road system not only facilitated inter-regional and interprovincial communication; it also brought the cities closer to the countryside and narrowed the urban-rural social gap. In addition to convenient roads and an expanded domestic air service, the most significant improvement in waterway communication was the availability of motorboats. This was particularly important for the rural people of the Mekong Delta whose living depended on the crisscrossing system of rivers and canals. If in some localities the rural farmers could not purchase motorboats for their convenient use, it was not because of financial limitations but because of security reasons. In these areas motorboats were considered a military utility, and their purchases were curtailed.

Except for those farmlands that were left uncultivated because of war and insecurity, most areas under cultivation benefited from farm mechanization and modern farming techniques. Tilling machines, chemical fertilizers, and insecticides, which were imported with U.S. aid money, made it possible for the farmers to increase crop production significantly. The average yield of rice per hectare rose remarkably owing to the import of new hybrid seeds whose use was greatly encouraged. Chicken raising in particular had become a new expanding industry which quickly gained

in popularity with the import of U.S. breeds, U.S. feed, and U.S. techniques. More importantly the 1970 agrarian reform program, which was perhaps the most tangible tribute to U.S. economic and technological aid, had brought about some true measure of social equality and might someday change South Vietnam's social fabric entirely.

In public health, there was no doubt that U.S.-sponsored MEDCAP activities had resulted in better health care for those areas where indigenous doctors were a rarity. In addition, district and village health stations and the availability of U.S.-provided medicine for most medical treatment needs also contributed to better health for the rural peasantry. Several diseases heretofore considered fatal such as lung tuberculosis had been brought under control and were no longer incurable. This was possible due to the highly-specialized and advanced U.S. treatment methods which were a far cry from the French general practice approach. For this reason, a certain number of hospitals and dispensaries established by the U.S. in South Vietnam quickly became popular among local patients because of their effectiveness.

In education, school facilities had expanded manyfold over the years in keeping with educational development trends. Aside from higher education institutes in major cities, high and elementary schools were available in all district towns and villages which brought education to within reach of the rural child. Education was further advanced by the support of U.S. funds which provided better school books and other supplies for the needy students. English also became the major foreign language option for most students who preferred it to French for obvious reasons. English schools, both U.S.-sponsored and private, mushroomed in every major city which catered to increasing numbers of adults, among them civil servants, servicemen, and people who had business connections with Americans. The traditional culture of Vietnam with its waning Chinese and French heritage, was now enriched by the new impact of American language and culture.

While middle-aged South Vietnamese naturally tended to be conservative and adhered with nostalgia to traditional Vietnamese and French culture, the young people found American culture fashionable and quickly adapted themselves to it. This was evident in the way they dressed and

the kind of music they adored. In many urban homes, people used lively, bold colors for the interior, an obvious imitation of American decoration style. More conspicuously, the tall and stylish buildings which were rapidly constructed during the 1965-70 period for the purpose of leasing to Americans added a modern outlook to major cities making them more beautiful and impressive. With the buildup of U.S. troops, apartment buildings also began to develop and expand rapidly. This was quite a change in living pattern for many South Vietnamese who had been familiar only with single family dwellings or extended family cohabitation within the same house.

As a result of the American buildup, a great number of people turned to activities directly or indirectly connected with services for U.S. units and troops. These were contractors, entrepreneurs, businessmen, and some civilian employees serving in U.S. organizations. Because of lucrative service contracts and business dealings, these people gained sizeable incomes, and many rapidly amassed great fortunes. High income and quick wealth also turned these people into a new privileged urban class, a class by itself that never existed in Vietnamese society before.

Another emerging social element was the prostitutes and bar girls whose numbers quickly multiplied with the buildup of U.S. troops. Socially considered the basest and most contemptible, these elements seemed to take to the good material life with a revenge. With the good and easy money they made, they spent it in far-out fashions and a flashy, abandoned life style which exerted a bad influence on women and led many among them, the gullible and the morally loose, to follow in their sinful steps. This unwittingly upset the usually puritan mores of traditional South Vietnamese society.

The next privileged social group consisted of civilian employees serving in U.S. organizations whose salaries were two or three times larger than those of GVN civil servants or servicemen. This disparity in income coupled with a most lopsided distribution of wealth was a major source of frustration and social injustice. The civil servants, servicemen, and policemen, those who received fixed and much lower salaries, considered themselves and were in fact the most underprivileged elements of society. They were understandably frustrated because the compensation

they were receiving did not measure up to the sacrifices and contributions they made for the sake of the country's survival. By contrast, the people who made the most money were those who practically contributed nothing to the war effort.

As a result of U.S. aid benefits and the free-flowing money spent by U.S. troops, the urban society of South Vietnam became more and more materialistic-oriented. Material wealth eventually became the yardstick by which human fulfillment was measured. As people attached more value to material acquisitions, morality suffered a great setback. This materialistic race involved the majority of urban people, including those so-called spiritual leaders and custodians of morality. It broke up families, fostered crimes, and fomented juvenile delinquency. The ills were so widespread that responsible civic leaders warned of social decadence but were impotent to do anything about it. New fads such as long hair, hippy living, and punk rock, unquestionably the expressions of an American subculture, caught on with an urban youth devoted to free love and fast living. Bars and night clubs which catered to the GI on leave were also the hangouts for the degenerate urban youth. Drugs such as marijuana and heroine, which were almost non-existent before the war, now became a thriving business for trafiquants and pushers who adhered to the American GI clientele. These drugs soon found their way into big cities and made victims among the youth of rich families. All of these happenings accentuated the contrast between the cities and the rural areas and made the rural peasant feel increasingly alienated from his urban brother. Gradually, it seemed that the South Vietnamese people were living in two separate worlds far removed from each other.

Despite these undesirable side-effects, both U.S. aid and the U.S. presence enabled South Vietnam to meet several serious challenges and survive after the U.S. pull-out. Accustomed to the U.S. presence, however, the South Vietnamese suddenly found the American absence a great void and big psychological shock. The withdrawal of U.S. military and civilian advisors from Vietnamese governmental and military structure created a vacuum, especially in the areas of research and planning and supporting resources. Ordinarily, if a corps/MR commander wanted to

replace a province chief, he had to submit his recommendation through channels to the Prime Minister and the President for approval. Now if the U.S. corps/MR senior advisor was present and agreed with the corps/MR commander's recommendation, he would only need to talk to the Prime Minister or the President, and the province chief would be quickly removed. Such was the power enjoyed by U.S. senior advisors in South Vietnam. Politically, however, the absence of U.S. advisors was a blessing because it offered a good opportunity for South Vietnam to try harder, to gain self-confidence, and to prove that it had reached maturity in all areas of national endeavor. It also helped combat the pernicious effect of the Communist propaganda line that "South Vietnam was a puppet of American imperialism."

On balance, the net result of the American presence in South Vietnam was that no matter how well-intentioned and dedicated Americans had proved to be, the Vietnamese always felt that their friends were playing the leading role in all fields of endeavor. They also had the impression that the U.S. was behind everything that ever happened to South Vietnam. The inescapable feeling among some Vietnamese nationalists who gave their allegiance to the Republic of Vietnam was that the South could never have made its just cause prevail and used it effectively as a viable alternative to Communism. Hence, there were those who seriously questioned the usefulness of what they were doing and especially the wisdom of American participation in the war.

On its part, the United States itself must have perceived that the essential thing was for the South to have a worthy cause to fight for, and that its policy should have been conceived with that in mind. Yet in its haste to achieve quick success and a military victory the United States had been too eager to take everything upon itself and allowed itself to control almost every facet of the RVN's effort in the process. So encompassing and visible was this control that it left the RVN utterly passive, dependent, subservient, and unable to make decisions for its own sake and negated whatever cause the RVN had built for its struggle. This domination was plain to the people of South Vietnam, to the world, and to our enemy in the North as well. This was the inevitable consequence of American eagerness, competitiveness, and work

ethics which are among distinctive features of the American people and society. If in the complex struggle against Communism in the South, these traits had been made to work in harmony with those of Vietnamese individual and social character, the results might have been different. And if the U.S. had been more aware of the nature of South Vietnamese society and its effect on the conduct of the war, then it could have devoted more efforts to help South Vietnam resolve or alleviate its social problems, a main impediment to success over the years.

CHAPTER IV

Social Problems

Discrimination and Factionalism

In the mid-16th century when Nguyen Hoang, a forefather of the Nguyen dynasty, petitioned Prince Trinh Kiem for the governorship of Thuan Hoa, the poor, troubled, and remotest land on the southern frontier, the idea of secession must have been his main and true motive.[1] As history was later to prove his vision true, he believed that "In the Hoanh Son (the Annamitic Cordillera) there must be security for thousands of generations." Knowing that his posture was too weak to fight the Trinh warlords after they had killed his eldest brother, Nguyen Hoang was planning his own escape and nurturing the dream of carving out his own kingdom in the far South. This was perhaps the earliest and most explanatory evidence of the traditional North-South rift in the history of Vietnam.

For the next 150 years, from the barren and lawless township of Thuan Hoa, the Nguyen warlords expanded the frontiers of Vietnam southward to the Mekong Delta after destroying the Champa Kingdom and annexing parts of Chenla (present-day Cambodia) in the process. The southern part of divided Vietnam had become then a haven for persons who had lost their standing in the North, the discontented intelligentsia, those who opposed the Trinh rule, and the venturesome poor in quest of a better living. Though sparsely populated and endowed with scant resources, the South under the Nguyen had successfully and repeatedly repelled violent attacks by the Trinh through the sheer force of their autarky spirit.

[1] Thuan Hoa in the old days is presently in the area of Hue City.

As Vietnamese territory grew in length, communication became difficult and the differences deepened between North and South. As in the old days, the imperial court could only maintain loose control over outlying areas. By force of protracted separation the traditions and customs originating in the Northern heartland became relaxed in the free and pioneer spirit of the frontier. Contact with, and borrowing from, Indian civilization through the intermediary of the Chams and Khmers also brought about significant alterations in the heavily Chinese-influenced culture of the North.

Time and isolation finally combined to accentuate these changes in the South. Though essentially the same language, Vietnamese underwent some modifications in its diffusion. In the area of the Perfume River, alteration came in the form of lower pitches and restricted pitch variations in the tonal contrast; in the Mekong Delta and the Dong Nai River basin, linguistic expression became plainer and more direct.[2] Over the length of Vietnam, not only did the accent change from one province to another, but the vocabulary and modes of expression also differed. The milder climate of the South seemed to favor the pioneers; they did not need heavy clothes as in the North, and their housing could be built less elaborately because of fewer typhoons. The immensity and fertility of the land and abundance of food also made life easier and had a distinctive effect on the character of the southern people. Because of fewer hardships and less competition there was no need for exertion and aggressiveness.

When the French occupied Vietnam in the middle of the 19th century, they strictly applied a policy of "rule by division." Vietnam was partitioned into three regions and each placed under a different administrative system. North Vietnam (Tonkin) and Central Vietnam (Annam)

[2] The Perfume River flows through the area of Hue. The Dong Nai and Mekong Rivers wind their courses east and west of Saigon, respectively.

became French "protectorates" which were nominally under the Nguyen emperor but ruled by French governors. South Vietnam (Cochinchina), being a colony, was governed directly by the French. The status of Vietnamese nationals differed from region to region, with Southerners being the most favored. Movement from one region to another was made difficult; in fact, traveling from North to South Vietnam was not unlike crossing the border into another country. The recruitment of Northern laborers to work on Southern plantations and their merciless exploitation by French operators eventually became a haunting memory among Northerners. Divisiness between regions therefore widened to the point of becoming alienation.

In 1946 while the Ho Chi Minh delegation was on its way to Fontainebleau, France to discuss the reunification and independence of Vietnam the French High Commissioner for Indochina, Admiral d'Argenlieu, proclaimed Cochinchina a separate republic (naturally under French protection). An autonomous all-South Vietnamese government was established and fomented by the French, the undercurrent of secession with and hostility toward North Vietnam came out into the open. In Saigon secessionists sought out Northern-born citizens and arrested, beat, or ostracized them. During this period Northerners living in the South had to conceal their identity and imitated the Southern accent to protect themselves. Even in 1949 when Bao Dai accepted to cooperate with the French, and a national government was established for all three regions, these feelings of hatred were not completely erased.

The Geneva Agreements, concluded on 20 July 1954, partitioned the country at the 17th parallel. A million Northerners, migrants and government employees (from the northern part of Central Vietnam) came to the South. Thus was the amalgam process begun. If this mixing came about as a blessing in that it entailed the integration of modes of thinking, ways of life, mores and customs of the three regions into a national culture, it also generated a great deal of friction and smoldering rivalries.

Refugees were given food, money, jobs, and land to resettle themselves by the Ngo Dinh Diem government. Refugee military officers and government employees enjoyed more trust because of their proven anti-

Communist position. But cadres from Central Vietnam were understandably the ones most trusted by President Diem. The overwhelming presence of Northern and Central officials in the administration and the military at this time caused a great deal of resentment among the Southern population. Refugees from North and Central Vietnam, who lived in resettlement areas and whom the local populace regarded as a privileged group, took years to integrate into the mainstream of South Vietnamese social life.

The Ngo Dinh Diem government must have tried hard to curb the effect of regional difference. Southern-born individuals of prominence were given good treatment and appointed to highly visible but ceremonial positions. For example Mr. Diem selected a high-level functionary under the French colonial government, Mr. Nguyen Ngoc Tho, as his Vice-President. Mr. Truong Vinh Le and his successor, Mr. Tran Van Lam, became President of the National Assembly, and Mr. Nguyen Van Vang was appointed Delegate of the Government; these were but a few examples. Mr. Diem also took great care in selecting most province chiefs of the Mekong Delta from among Southerners. Similar efforts were visible in the armed forces. Several Southern-born generals received important assignments at this time such as Generals Le Van Ty, Duong Van Minh, Tran Van Minh, Tran Van Don, Le Van Kim, Do Cao Tri, Mai Huu Xuan and Tran Tu Oai.

However, key power-wielding or sensitive positions were mostly entrusted to loyal Central Diemists. For example the III Corps, which defended the capital city of Saigon, was placed under the successive commands of General Le Van Nghiem and General Ton That Dinh. The Airborne troops and the Special Froces, whose strike units were on constant alert, were commanded by Colonel Nguyen Chanh Thi and Colonel Le Quang Tung respectively. The Military Security Service had Colonel Do Mau as its chief. The Armor command and infantry divisions located in vital areas were all placed under trusted Central-born officers. Other important government officials and the chiefs of key provinces were also appointed with similar considerations. It was thus difficult to defend the Ngo Dinh Diem government as being free of regionalism.

Regionalism under the First Republic was further compounded by religious discrimination. President Ngo Dinh Diem's family were devout

Catholics of long standing. His eldest living brother, Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc, was the senior prelate in South Vietnam. In the Confucian tradition the eldest brother had tremendous authority over his younger siblings. Father Thuc commanded substantial influence in the Vinh Long diocese, which saw significant developments during his tenure. Here was the seedbed of many a national program which highlighted the regime of the First Republic such as the Nhan Vi (Personalist) cadre training center, the Republican Youth, and the Strategic Hamlets. Catholic clerics had easy access to the Independence Palace, and this rapport naturally resulted in governmental favors to Catholic organizations.

If these favors had been confined to religious matters, perhaps they would not have incurred so much criticism. But this cozy relationship between state and religion had been allowed to bear upon the appointment of government cadres. Besides being from Central Vietnam, any aspirants to inner-circle trust and fast advancement believed it necessary to be Roman Catholic like the President. Position-seekers therefore began to read the Bible and convert to Catholicism in increasing numbers. Men of self-respect, however, refused to follow suit; despite this, many of them continued to hold key jobs. Naturally the regime could not force all civil servants and servicemen to adopt Catholicism. If such was its secret desire, this desire was never openly admitted.

The ascendency of military men to power after President Diem's death raised hopes of eradicating discriminatory practices deemed detrimental to national unity and the war effort. Since the RVNAF had always been regarded as a melting pot where regional and religious harmony prevailed, everyone expected the new leaders to set the example.

But the public soon found with disappointment that regionalist feelings were still strong and persistent. Once holding power, for example, General Duong Van Minh made no secret of his discrimination against non-southerners with whom he had no inclination to cooperate. So when General Nguyen Khanh, a native Southerner who was married to a Northern woman, deposed Minh on 30 January 1964, he enjoyed some popularity among the generals. Other civilian leaders who succeeded Khanh

in power also seemed unable to avoid this common weakness. Mr. Tran Van Huong, for example, preferred to use only Southerners. His government, which was composed mostly of Southerners, did not last long because of this narrow-mindedness. The subsequent conflict between Chief of State Phan Khac Suu (a Southerner) and Prime Minister Phan Huy Quat (a Northerner) stemmed largely from regional rivalry. Prime Minister Quat had asked a number of cabinet ministers to resign in order for him to reshuffle his cabinet. Two Southern cabinet members, supported by Mr. Suu, refused to comply. Compounded by criticisms from religious groups the open rift finally forced Phan Huy Quat to resign and hand power over to the military in June 1966.

Regional discrimination did not just reign among government and military circles; it prevailed among religious and political groups as well. During the Buddhist struggle of 1966 the rift became evident among Buddhist ranks, which split into the militant An Quang faction led by Central-born monks and the Vien Hoa Dao (Institute for the Propagation of Buddhism) led by moderate Northern monks. On several occasions the schism between the two factions degenerated into bloody confrontation, and this weakened the ranks of military Buddhists. Things were no better for political parties whose ranks were also split along regional lines. There was no solidarity between the Central and Southern branches of the Dai Viet Party; likewise, there was no harmony among the Northern, Central, and Southern organizations of the VNQDD (Nationalist Party). Even party veterans such as Vu Hong Khanh and Nguyen Hoa Hiep were unable to patch up regional differences and unify the VNQDD.

From 1 November 1963 on, the problem of religious rivalry ceased to be a major concern but regional rivalry was still pervasive, though less visible. The stabilizing principle that seemed to guide every government after Mr. Diem was that the least trouble would arise if only native-born officials were appointed to local positions. This guideline also dictated that organizations at the central level (such as the Cabinet, the Council for the Preservation of the Constitution, or the Council of State Elders) should have equal representation from all three regions. Even in military organizations, commanding officers

often tried to achieve geographical balance in personnel assignments to avoid being branded as discriminatory and curb the unsettling effects of regionalism.

However, there were notable and successful exceptions. The Northern General Nguyen Duc Thang, for example, had served as CG of IV Corps/MR-4. Generals Tran Van Don, Do Cao Tri, and Ngo Quang Truong, all Southerners, had successively held command of I Corps/MR-1. General Ngo Quang Truong in particular after leading the paratroopers to regain control of Da Nang and Hue during the Buddhist struggle of 1966 was appointed CG of the 1st Infantry Division in Hue. Another significant exception was that during General Truong's tour of duty as I Corps/MR-1 commander, from mid 1972 to 1975, two out of three infantry divisions and five out of six provinces and cities under his control were headed by Northerners; the remaining infantry division and province were at times commanded by Southerners. This was quite a success in a region where regional bigotry was reputedly strong.

While regional discrimination was a fact of South Vietnamese life, the game had its own rules. These were fairness and openness. Fairness required equal treatment and devotion to the common good and not the selfish interests of any individual or faction. Openness demanded that everything be above-board, unhidden. As long as these rules were respected, the problem of regionalism could be surmounted.

But if religious and regional discrimination could be gradually kept under control through conscious efforts, factionalism continued to reign unchecked in all areas. This acute sectarian attitude tended to consider one's own clique, group, party, family, or religion as the only one worthy of trust and preponderance. Such an attitude caused untold harm and was a tragedy for the Republic of Vietnam.

Under the rule of the Ngo, "our party" and "our family" stood above everything else. The party here was the *Can Lao Nhan Vi Cach Mang* (the evolutionary Personalist Labor Party), which Mr. Ngo Dinh Nhu founded and directed. The Can Lao Party recruited its members secretly and positioned them throughout the governmental and military establishment. Its strength derived from the fact that it took great pains to screen and select members who were loyal and frequently competent. But

since the Can Lao was a government's party, it was not easy to prevent opportunists from joining for their own selfish aims. These black sheep caused so much damage to the Party that it eventually lost both prestige and attractiveness.

Family rule was a charge most widely leveled at President Diem's regime. But besides the President, only two of his brothers ever held public office: Mr. Ngo Dinh Nhu who served as Political Advisor to the President and Mr. Ngo Dinh Luyen, Ambassador-at-large to some European countries. Mr. Luyen spent most of his time in Europe and contributed little to state affairs. Mr. Nhu, however, was the eminence grise, the mastermind of the regime and the one truly indispensible to the President. It was he who charted the RVN course and devised major policies. In the eyes of the South Vietnamese people, Mr. Nhu and Mr. Diem accomplished exceptionally good things. Most criticisms or hatred, therefore, were mainly directed against the three other members of the Ngo family: Mme Ngo Dinh Nhu (maiden name Tran Thi Le Xuan), Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc, and Mr. Ngo Dinh Can, the youngest brother.

Mme Ngo Dinh Nhu was probably the most maligned of all. Since President Diem was a bachelor, Mme Nhu was elevated to the position of First Lady. Intelligent, quick-minded, and progressive, she meant to help the President and raise the status of Vietnamese women. Perhaps her excessive zeal was carrying her too far, especially in a society that by tradition conceived of the women's role as a rather inconspicuous one. Her imperiousness showed in the many ways she verbally dominated and even abused her colleagues in the National Assembly while trying to push through her pet legislations, the Family Code and the Morality Preservation Act. Mme Nhu was the first woman to launch the collar-less, open-necked *ao dai* (lady's traditional tunic), a fashion style that caught on sucessfully in Saigon. At the height of the Buddhist struggle in the summer of 1963, she was constantly lashing out at the monks with bitterness, cynically depicting their self-immolation as "a barbecue party." Her wry comments had on several occasions irritated even American officials in Saigon. Mme Nhu was thus the most controversial figure of the First Republic.

Contributing little to the affairs of state, Archbishop Ngo Dinh Thuc endeavored to enhance the posture of the Catholic Church. He built and developed numerous Catholic institutions. His faith and perhaps a little personal ambition were the motivating force behind his activism and efforts to expand Catholic power in a country composed largely of non-Catholics.[3]

The third controversial figure was Mr. Ngo Dinh Can. Being the youngest son, he stayed in Hue to care for their mother, Mme Ngo Dinh Kha. Simply on account of his brother's status, he became a leading personality in the northern part of South Vietnam. The Delegate of the Government in MR-1, major unit commanders, and province chiefs all came to report their official business to him and to seek his advice. A leading member of the Can Lao Party in MR-1, he ran business ventures there to finance party activities and also controlled a secret police network designed to eliminate the VCI. This police network was known for its effectiveness against the Communists, but it was also employed to suppress opposition. As his power grew apace, rumor had it that his personal prestige had put him at odds with his brother Nhu. In any event this power of his, which practically cowered everyone in MR-1, had been achieved only at the cost of widespread hatred against his person. No doubt his henchmen were indulging in abuse and excesses in a region where the people's hardship had become legendary.

With the fall of the First Republic the RVN witnessed a period of disruptive turmoil and factionalism such as had never occurred before. In the place of one ruling party there was now a proliferation of conflicting, quarrelling parties, factions, and cliques. South Vietnamese society, relieved of the constraints of the previous regime, seemed to explode in an uncontrollable paroxysm of activism.

[3]The Vatican was contemplating at the time the appointment of two cardinals for Vietnam, one for the North, one for the South. Msgr Thuc apparently aspired to become one. In the end only Msgr Trinh Nhu Khue of North Vietnam was elevated to cardinal.

In the wake of the 1 November 1963 coup, the following factions emerged: the ruling Duong Van Minh clique which was still dividing among its members the spoils of power, the Nguyen Khanh clique that staged the putsch soon afterwards, and the Buddhist clerics who had become arrogant power brokers. Different university student groups and Dai Viet activists also began to make their impact felt. Along with the Nguyen Khanh clique, the "young Turks" (Nguyen Chanh Thi, Nguyen Cao Ky, Nguyen Huu Co, et al.) made their spectacular debut on the political stage. The Catholics, still nurturing their battered image from their close association with the previous regime, became defensive and reacted only when absolutely necessary. The Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, watching from the sidelines, were content with their quiet little power niches. At the same time, civic groups such as the Caravelle Group, the Inter-School Group, old party leaders, and returned political exiles were emerging tumultuously onto the national scene, all vying for power. The South Vietnamese political arena soon turned into chaos. Individuals were pitted against individuals, students against students, parties against parties, religions against religions, and each against all others. Coups and counter-coups came in rapid succession. In the twenty months following 1 November 1963 South Vietnam had no less than nine governments, but none seemed to enjoy any popularity.

When the military government led by Nguyen Van Thieu and Nguyen Cao Ky came to power the situation began to stabilize, but not significantly. The victorious young Turks, barely in control, were already beginning to quarrel among themselves. Their elimination of General Nguyen Chanh Thi from I Corps command provided militant Buddhists with a pretext for the next round of disturbances that were to break out in Hue and Da Nang in 1966. General Nguyen Huu Co's dismissal, though failing to cause any major trouble, marked the beginning of strained relations between President Nguyen Van Thieu and Vice President Nguyen Cao Ky, whose alliance had been consummated in a marriage of convenience through the 1967 elections. This rift, when seen in the light of the subsequent opposition by General Duong Van Minh's faction, who enjoyed the support of the An Quang Buddhists, was truly the source of disturbing tragi-comic events in the years ahead.

Civic and religious groups, who had been expecting a return to civilian rule, were clearly discontented. Political leaders, who regarded themselves as intellectuals, professed little respect for the individual worth and ability of the generals; they often had no inclination to collaborate with the military. For their part, military leaders prided themselves on their organizational skill and leadership role in the anti-Communist struggle and looked down on civilian leaders as "armchair politicians," or "tearoom-statesmen" who were both unrealistic and weak in leadership. Neither side seemed to understand the other nor was inclined to sit down with the other in a joint venture except when motivated by self-interest.

In general, the civilian Ngo Dinh Diem government, despite its ability to maintain a high degree of stability, had failed to produce a dynamic national unity. Subsequent military governments failed even more dismally to maintain the social order and achieve popular consent and unity. Apart from discrimination and factionalism, South Vietnam's social and political life was replete with contending pressure groups, among which the influence of major religions seemed to eclipse that of political parties. This was a phenomenon worth analyzing in depth.

The Struggle of Political and Religious Groups

To nationalist political groups operating in North Vietnam, the Geneva Agreements of 1954, which partitioned the country into two parts, came as an excruciating blow. Stunned by the event, the Dai Viet, the VNQDD, and other prominent Northern political figures banded together to found the "Committee for the Protection of North Vietnam" with the purpose of exhorting National Army units to resist the attempt to divide the country. They were rapidly overtaken by events when masses of refugees started to leave and military units boarded ships heading south. During their last days in North Vietnam, therefore, nationalists achieved nothing significant apart from dismantling the One-Pillar Pagoda in Hanoi, which was a revered cultural relic, and shipping out a number of anthropological artifacts from the Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient museum, also in Hanoi.

Once in Saigon, refugee political groups found their hands tied for lack of operating and popular bases; their southern chapters did not fare any better because of organizational weaknesses. At that juncture politicians from Southern religious sects were still wavering among several alternatives: support Bao Dai, collaborate with the French, support the new Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem, or just wait and see.

According to Mr. Nhi Lang, a key witness of sectarian politics during those days, while the Binh Xuyen affair was coming to a crisis and after Chief of State Bao Dai had just called Prime Minister Diem to France for consultations, representatives from eighteen political and civic groups met on 29 April 1955 to form the People's Revolutionary Council. Under the collective leadership of Nguyen Bao Toan, representative of the Social Democratic Party (Hoa Hao), Ho Han Son, representative of the Vietnam Restoration Association (Cao Dai), and Nhi Lang, representative of the National Resistance Front (anti-French Cao Dai), this Council decided to depose Bao Dai, dissolve the Ngo Dinh Diem cabinet, and entrust statesman Diem with the mission of forming a new government whose function was to hold elections for the Constitutional Assembly and to found a republic for South Vietnam. This resolution took Prime Minister Diem by surprise but gave him more leverage in solving subsequent crises, although those who had been instrumental in fomenting the bold move were eventually to find themselves as political exiles.[4]

After his victory over ex-Emperor Bao Dai, President Diem grew impatient with political opposition. From 1956 to 1958, remnants of the Dai Viet and VNQDD in Central Vietnam were quietly struggling against the Can Lao Party and its front, the National Revolutionary Movement. An army unit sympathetic to the Dai Viet seceded and set up a resistance

[4] "The Origin of the First Republic" from The Memoirs of Nhi Lang (now a refugee in the United States), Que Huong Tuyen Tap (Selections on the Fatherland), 1977, pp. 19-27.

base in the Ba Long area west of Quang Tri, but the dissidents disintegrated when President Diem sent loyal troops after them. Another attempt at agitation, undertaken by the VNQDD in Quang Nam Province, was also quickly squelched.

In April 1960 eighteen prominent figures met in the Caravelle Hotel in Saigon to set up a new political organization called the Bloc for Liberty and Progress and signed a manifesto demanding improvements in the government. The manifesto called for a more liberal regime, reelection of the National Assembly, and a government fully accountable to the National Assembly, implying of course the participation of the signatory parties. In November 1960 the aborted coup staged by military officers such as Colonels Nguyen Chanh Thi, Vuong Van Dong, Nguyen Trieu Hong, and Pham Van Lieu led to the arrest of one member of the Caravelle Group, Mr. Phan Khac Suu, on charges of colluding with the coup leaders. The remaining members of the Caravelle Group were also arrested; after this, opposition to Mr. Diem seemed to be completely paralyzed.

After the demise of the First Republic the political scene of South Vietnam came alive. Two and a half months after the November coup the Republic of Vietnam had no fewer than 62 political groups. Old parties had broken into splinter groups and new parties were quickly formed. Several political exiles returned from abroad and set about forming parties to contend for power. Inaugurating the Council of Notabilities, General Duong Van Minh expressed the junta's hope that the country would revert to true democratic practice and asked the Council to draft a new Constitution. The Council launched into endless debates and failed to accomplish anything. The Military Revolutionary Council, under General Minh's leadership, had been wanting to consolidate political groups into three or four major parties. Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao was entrusted with this mission, but his liaison with political groups towards this end failed to produce any result. The spate of activity by different groups on the political scene then bode well for the effort to build a democratic system. Ultimately, however, these political groups did little else than loudly criticize the government and denounce one another.

When General Nguyen Khanh acceded to power, he proclaimed himself free of political ties; yet the composition of his Cabinet clearly showed

Dai Viet colors. Dr. Nguyen Ton Hoan, a Dai Viet leader living in exile in France, had been invited home to set up a new government. Falling short of this goal, he finally served as Deputy Prime Minister for Rural Reconstruction. Two other Dai Viet leaders also joined Khanh's cabinet, Mr. Ha Thuc Ky as Minister of the Interior and Dr. Phan Huy Quat as Foreign Minister. Not long afterwards the Khanh-Dai Viet alliance began to show signs of strain. One by one, first Ha Thuc Ky then Nguyen Ton Hoan resigned their posts after accusing General Nguyen Khanh of holding all power in his hands. The truth was Dai Viet leaders had failed in their design to place their own cadres in the administrative structure. On at least two occasions the Dai Viet were involved in aborted coups during this period.

Skillful as he was as a tight rope walker in a hopelessly complicated political situation, General Nguyen Khanh could not fail to notice the profound division of the country. He summoned representatives of political groups and asked them to draft a statute for political parties designed to move towards the establishment of two or three strong blocs, which he believed was more conducive to the process of building democracy. His appeal fell on deaf ears because political groups in South Vietnam simply could not work together, much less arrive at any consensus.

By the time the Thieu-Ky government began its rule there was so much political proliferation that, according to a report by the Directorate of National Police, more than one hundred groups had been registered as parties or associations. The man in the street completely lost track of the names of political parties and their leaders. Many new parties had nothing more than just a name, a temporary office with a sign, and a few activists.

In this profusion of parties, only long-standing parties commanded some real strength. The Dai Viet (Greater Vietnam) had a following in the Hue-Quang Tri area and some other local chapters. The Viet Nam Quoc Dan Dang (Vietnamese Nationalist Party), or Viet Quoc for short, had a following in the Quang Nam, Quang Tin and Quang Ngai areas. The Cao Dai sect in the meantime was trying hard to rebuild the Vietnam Restoration Association, which had been formed in 1943. The Hoa Hao sect