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SPECIAL
REPORT

The Promise of Vietnam

by Sol W. Sanders

This issue of Focus publishes a special report on Vietnam prepared by the veteran journalist Sol W. Sanders in August 1970 following a farewell visit to that embattled country. Sanders is leaving Southeast Asia after more than twenty years of distinguished foreign correspondence in the area.

SAIGON - I find it necessary to restrain my optimism after a month's visit to Indochina in mid-summer 1970.

I hasten to add that I talk in relative terms. No morass like the Vietnam War will be quickly nor neatly adjusted. Too much is at stake for the Vietnamese on both sides, their friends and their enemies.

I do not expect an end to the killing soon. Both sides still have the ability - and see the necessity - to continue the struggle. I see little, if any, possibility of a negotiated settlement coming out of the Paris talks. And while the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam is most likely to continue, perhaps at even an accelerated pace, American involvement in Southeast Asia will not end.

Then how can one talk of "optimism?" What could possibly compensate for this horror that has cost 45,000 American lives, and at least 100,000 South Vietnamese and perhaps more than half a million North Vietnamese deaths? To estimate where the struggle stands today, one has to go back to what the non-Communist Vietnamese and the Americans have seen as their goals in the struggle. And, with a great possibility of error, one has also to postulate the goals of the North Vietnamese and their Communist Chinese and Russian supporters.

I would argue that there is today a new and radically different situation on the embattled peninsula. In the miasma of charges and counter-charges on the American political scene, this has been almost completely obscured. Here, then, are my conclusions:

First, North Vietnam, bled by the costly and disastrous policies that led it to take on South Vietnam (and then the U.S.) in a full-scale classical war in 1964, is in extreme difficulty. Hanoi is being forced into a complete reversal of strategy - abandoning its effort to "clinch" the struggle in the short term, and returning to drawn-out guerrilla warfare. This development comes parallel to, and to a considerable extent intertwined with, the growing dominance of the Chinese Communist "line" and its partisans in the Indochinese Communist Party - and of Peking as the chief ally of the North Vietnamese.

Second, South Vietnam, which progressively lost its "soul" during the black years immediately preceding the massive entry of U.S. troops in 1965 and even more so during the virtual American occupation since then, is daily regaining its self-respect, becoming stronger, and developing more and more into a national entity that can stand up to the Communists. Two events - the Tet offensive of 1968 that dealt a death

blow to the Communist infrastructure inside the South, and the 1969 bombing halt over North Vietnam that heralded the start of the American withdrawal - initiated the resuscitation of the Saigon regime. South Vietnam could become the dominant power on the peninsula within the next five years, such as South Korea has in that long-term struggle.

Third, the U.S. withdrawal, ironically, may increase the efficiency of American efforts to bolster the Saigon regime. It has now become almost "unfashionable" for American civilian and military bureaucrats to be associated with the struggle; and just possibly, this may place U.S. aid and advice in the hands of veterans who put sincerity of effort above promotion in government service and domestic U.S. political advantage. And the Cambodian campaign, so widely misinterpreted in the West, again proves that the U.S. commitment in the area is so important that any Washington administration must risk popular disfavor inside the U.S. in order to preserve American world strategic interests in Southeast Asia.

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If you think this is the same old South Vietnam you have been reading about for years in the newspapers, you have to go down to the Mekong River Delta country below Saigon, where forty percent of the population lives.

Sure there are still old problems - government outposts lost to enemy action, for example. An American generally gruffly points out that the ARVN (the South Vietnamese regulars) did not react fast enough to save many of them

during a "high point" (the Communists no longer talk of offensives) this spring.

But there are other, more significant signs. There was the whole – repeat whole – guerrilla unit that came in to surrender to the government in early August in Vinh Long Province. There were about twenty individuals, many veterans of more than five years in the Communists' local army.

Look at the six hundred men who "Chieu-Hoi-ed" (an amnesty program of the Saigon regime) in the first week in August. Check the list and you see that more and more of them are veterans, important "cadres" of the insurrectionary movement – not just peasants seeking a way to get a little money and government attention by abandoning their role as part-time participants on the Communist side. The Communist just cannot get enough recruits for their "regular" forces any more – the guerrillas who moved up to regular-army status, supplied from Cambodia, during the 1962-68 period. About half of present Communist regular strength in the Mekong Delta now are North Vietnamese moved in from Cambodia during the past year. And now, with any luck at all, the ARVN and U.S. air power have cut them off from their supply lines in northeastern Cambodia.

So much has happened in the past year. In 1962, the best division in the then battered ARVN was the 25th. Against President Ngo Dinh Diem's wishes, it was transferred after his assassination to the Delta. It was originally recruited in Central Vietnam, and had fought well there. But to take a reluctant Central Vietnamese to the Delta is like taking a Brooklyn boy to the Everglades. Desertion and failure followed.

Today the 25th is not only respectable. It has again become one of the best ARVN units, and it did a job that surprised the American Military Aid Command in Vietnam (MACV) during the Cambodian campaign.

To be sure, the Seventh Division in the Delta still has a long way to go, and the 21st even further. But it is significant that General Nguyen Van Truong, the model of the new, American-trained Vietnamese officer, has just been assigned to the Delta military region to

take over. Truong's First Division has been more than a match for the North Vietnamese who opposed him along the DMZ on the border of North Vietnam. He represents the new professionalism of the ARVN.

But in part, the success of the First Division reflects what has happened to the North Vietnamese. For example:

In mid-July, a new Ninth Regiment of North Vietnamese started trying to break through into northern Republic of Vietnam territory. They were caught out in the open on a highland plateau west of the site of the former American base at Khe Sanh. (Remember? In 1968, it was supposed to have been another Dien Bien Phu.) They were eating, had their rifles stacked, did not seem to know what to do when the U.S. and ARVN aircraft hit them. The result was a massacre.

An American pilot tells the story of strafing a small group of North Vietnamese infiltrators in the jungled mountains of Central Vietnam. Suddenly, he saw dozens of North Vietnamese troops standing on the brow of a hill watching the whole scene – "like tourists at an air show." He flew back, dropped napalm in their midst.

These grisly stories indicate that something is badly wrong with North Vietnamese troops these days. What is it?

A prisoner from this same Ninth Regiment, caught when one of its battalions tried to get down into the lowlands, tells the story. They were not told about American air power when they were sent down from North Vietnam. Only that they would be fighting Americans, and that the local Vietnamese would welcome them. But it was not quite like that. His battalion arrived in the lowlands and was engaged within twelve hours by the ARVN. Villagers had fled from them and tipped off the authorities just where they were. All together, more than three hundred were either captured or killed within three days.

I spoke to one of the prisoners through an interpreter. He was a bright-eyed, obviously intelligent farm boy. I asked him all the usual questions. He talked – and all the prisoners are talking

these days; they just don't want to stop. What he said was that his unit had left North Vietnam on May 3rd. He could not judge how long he was on the jungle trails in Laos because he had repeated attacks of malaria. "But I wasn't incapacitated enough to drop out of the operation," he said. There was no doubt that he had had enough of the war – and he indicated that his companions had, too – long before they reached Republic of Vietnam territory.

Communist indoctrination and discipline remain their greatest assets. But they are crumbling in the face of the acknowledged failure to impose a quick military-political defeat on the Americans and South Vietnamese.

Although Hanoi still does not officially admit its troops are in the South, or in Cambodia and Laos, a national, widely publicized campaign to aid the wounded back home in the villages has begun. And Japanese reporters out of North Vietnam report that ordinary people now talked of family members who had been killed in the South – irrespective of the party line.

As in all Communist states, the people of North Vietnam are in a pressure-cooker. It is assumed that the North Vietnamese leadership can keep the lid on; and most Hanoi-ologists here do not expect an explosion. But it is apparent on all fronts that there are severe strains. There is an economic downturn. And visitors report small but significant signs since the bombing halt in 1968 that things are not going well. Travelers say Hanoi itself has developed a woebegone look that did not exist during the height of the bombing.

So far there have been no shortages of ammunition among North Vietnamese troops anywhere in the South. But in the Delta, there is talk among the Communists of a return to the use of American-calibre weapons because of the difficulty of obtaining ammunition now that the supply line must run all the way back to the North Vietnamese port of Haiphong – into Cambodia and up through Laos and the North Vietnamese panhandle.

The Cambodian leadership's turn-about this spring was the culminating argument in a long struggle in Hanoi

over the ideological line. Since long before Ho Chi Minh's death a year ago, the Communists have been wrangling about where to go. The group that had been the "outs," the pro-Chinese Communists and the opponents of sending the regular army into the South in 1964, seems now to have moved into the ascendancy. If they have not done so personally — that is, their leader Truong Chinh has not yet replaced Le Duan as party secretary — they have done so in so far as public pronouncements go. For example:

Last December, North Vietnam's leading military figure, Vo Nguyen Giap, talked for the first time in many years about "protracted warfare" — the Chinese term for a long, guerrilla struggle. Then on February 14, Le Duan delivered a lengthy speech on the fortieth anniversary of the Indochinese Communist Party entitled, "Under the Glorious Party Banner, For Independence, Freedom, and Socialism, Let Us Advance and Achieve New Victories." Some Washington observers saw it as proof that Le Duan had taken on the mantle of the departed Ho. In Saigon, among students of North Vietnamese and Communist politics, the opposite was deduced: Le Duan had been forced to accept the line of his enemies in the pro-Chinese group.

Now an intensive "political education" program is going forward in North Vietnam. It could well be the prelude for a party congress before the end of the year. And that party congress may formally resolve the conflict.

Does it mean anything to the South Vietnamese and the Americans if one North Vietnamese Communist faction rather than another leads the country there? Many observers here say that pro-Chinese domination of the party, and the replacement of the former leadership, would give the North Vietnamese a way out of the corner in which they now find themselves.

For cornered they have been, the argument here goes, over the past five years: If the Communists continued to confront American power, then they risked severe defeat, if not total collapse. But to negotiate — in the sense that that word means in the West, with a probable compromise settlement

taking the peninsula back to 1954 when Vietnam was partitioned — would also be disastrous for them. It would, in Communist eyes, be an acceptance of defeat after enormous sacrifices.

Now a group appears headed toward power who have been saying that they (along with their Chinese sponsors) never proposed sending the Northern regulars into the South. Rather, they had always put their faith in a long, guerrilla war which would not bring about direct American intervention. And that is now the strategy that must be returned to, for better or for worse, because of developments both inside South Vietnam and elsewhere in the world.

Russian aid, on the massive scale available to back the invasion from mid-1964, may no longer be there, it is argued. Moscow has problems and commitments elsewhere — not the least of these being the thirty Russian divisions on the Central Asian Soviet-Chinese border.

The Vietnamese-U.S. Cambodian campaign — whatever its final outcome — has done three things: (1) it has cut off the sea-supply route which had delivered the great bulk of weapons and ammunition to the Communists in the southern end of the peninsula over the past five years; (2) it has destroyed the availability of rice to help feed the regular army that North Vietnam has hitherto kept in the field in South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos; and (3) it has at least pushed the areas where the North Vietnamese could "hole up" when not fighting, farther away from the most sensitive political targets in the South — Saigon and other populated areas at the southern end of the peninsula.

The North Vietnamese will now try to save what they can. Already Communist forces inside South Vietnam have broken up into smaller groups; gone back to more attacks but for smaller targets and goals; increased pure and simple terrorism against civilian targets. The regulars themselves have pulled back into remote geographic fastnesses — like the swampy jungles of the Camau Peninsula in the South, the jungled mountains of Central Vietnam, or into northeastern Cambodia and Laos. There, at least for the moment, they are out of the way of

South Vietnam and U.S. forces.

* * * *

The South Vietnamese reaction to all this is harder to describe or evaluate.

The physical and moral sewer that the war has made of Saigon, like so many cities in so many parts of the world over the past thirty years, is apparent. One cannot help but wonder how many of the orphaned or abandoned children that plague visitors on the streets will one day become the kind of juvenile delinquents turned into guerrilla soldiers that had more than a little to do with the start of the insurgency here.

There is a growing economic crisis. It is the result of quite contradictory and yet complementary things. Despite all the waste and demoralization that war has brought, probably more people live at a higher standard of living than ever before in South Vietnam. This was brought about by the artificial prosperity of having half a million free-spending American troops in the country during these past few years. To soak up the enormous amounts of money that were spent both officially and unofficially in the country, the U.S. brought in a subsidized flock of imports — at one time reaching \$700 million annually. It did the job. Until this spring, inflation was kept relatively small for a country at war which was producing less and less.

But now two things have happened: Official and unofficial American spending is declining, as the U.S. withdraws — hopefully to less than 200,000 troops by mid-1971. Secondly, Vietnamese government expenditures are rising rapidly as it takes over a larger and larger share of meeting the costs of war — for example, financing a 1.2 million-man army and an auxiliary militia of probably 1.5 million.

Next year, the budget ratio of expenditures to income could be something like 2.8 to one. And, anticipating this inflation, everyone is speculating. It is not just the Chinese businessmen and foreign importers and exporters. Even the rice farmers in the Delta, with one of the greatest crops in ten years, have tried to hoard and keep rice off the market for as long as possible to get maximum prices.

Yet there are many signs of a growing confidence in spite of this economic threat.

A bandwagon is rolling for President Nguyen Van Thieu. Maybe the best indicator is that the An Quang Pagoda Buddhists, the most bitter opponents of the war and, in the past, of Thieu and the military, entered the senatorial elections in mid-September with their own slate. They also took part in provincial elections in Central Vietnam in mid-August. (In the bloody battleground of Quang Ngai province — which resembles in so many ways our Kansas in the U.S. Civil War, and where the My Lai disaster took place — An Quang got five of the seats.)

A whole welter of politicians from South and Central Vietnam have now joined the President's flag. Others only wait to be asked. If the accusation is made that much of Ngo Dinh Diem's old team is now back at Independence Palace, the answer is simple. The country has such a small number of experienced and qualified administrators that of course those who served Diem during his nine years in power must be used by any administration hoping to reestablish order and efficiency in the bureaucracy.

One look at Saigon's police today tells you a lot. No one any more calls them "white mice" after the white uniforms they wear, and also because of their caution in the days after the Diem government was overthrown — not since Tet 1968 when they battled in the streets with hardened North Vietnamese regulars. Even Tan Son Nhout, the world's most overworked airport, has some sense of order, even though it moves more traffic than any other air terminus in the world.

Some of my colleagues have written stories about virulent anti-Americanism in Saigon. I cannot accept that. To be sure, there are "hoods" who attack drunken U.S. soldiers. But what many Americans in daily encounters are now getting, for the first time, is the reaction of Vietnamese who have got back their sense of pride. The time is gone, if it ever existed, when a Vietnamese official — military or civilian — could be fired simply as a result of criticism by his American adviser. It may seem ungrateful, but it is natural enough that the Vietnamese want to take their country

back, despite all the American sacrifices. And it is also common enough to find Americans in Saigon who want it both ways: a pliable Vietnam, but one that can defend itself and let the Americans go home.

Look back at Vietnam in the crisis years and you find a record that shows more pluses today than minuses. When Diem inherited a truncated country in 1954, he had no army. Saigon was run by pirates. There were a million refugees fleeing North Vietnam, tens of thousands of them arriving in Saigon with only the clothes and bundles they carried. (It is generally forgotten today, incidentally, that there would have been many more who would have fled the North if they had not had to fight their way out, or swim to ships offshore.) Today, whatever the successive regimes in the South have been, it is the fact that the South did manage to throw up a defense against the Communists.

And there are other huge pluses: a veteran army of 1.2 million, with — whatever its faults — experience. There are tens of thousands of Vietnamese with new skills — RMK, the giant American contracting combine, trained half a million alone when U.S. bases were being built there. There has been a huge development of the infrastructure, such as roads in the Delta, where there were hardly any before. The port of Saigon has at least 150 percent more capacity than it had in 1965 — including one whole new port area. In fact, there are now four additional ocean-going ports in South Vietnam that did not exist before 1965.

No doubt there has been vast suffering and destruction. But in economic terms, it may not count for much when and if peace returns. The Vietnamese village housing that was destroyed is built in a few days. Only now, for example, does one see the new-found prosperity of cement and other, more stable houses being built in Delta villages. On the famous "Street of No Joy" in Central Vietnam, the tin roofs of thousands of new houses sparkle in the sun. It is an area that is pacified at last — something the French could not do from 1948 to 1954.

Perhaps most important, a new spirit has been aroused. Inland, South Vietnam has had a social revolution. Some

aspects of it are not pretty. Prostitutes and black marketeers have made huge fortunes; they will probably be the accepted entrepreneurs of tomorrow. But real social progress is being made. Take these figures:

In 1970, there are 863,763 children in elementary school in the Delta. In 1964, that figure was only 490,605. There are almost 17,000 teachers today, to less than 8,000 in 1964. The University of Cantho now enrolls more than 3,000 students; it was only set up in 1968. If the insurgency had a social and political base, if the Communists were able to rouse the people against the government of Saigon for social and economic reasons, surely these figures point toward an effective answer that little by little the government is making.

A land reform program is finally off the ground, and will give land to some thirty percent of the population in the Delta. But perhaps more important, there are now 500,000 sampan motors which ingenious peasants have also begun to turn into pumps for their rice-fields. New rice varieties are doubling, sometimes tripling, production in some areas.

What all this means is that despite all the suffering and bloodletting — and no one can minimize it — this country is moving toward a new kind of society. The big question is, of course, will American public opinion — so much a victim of misunderstandings as to the nature of this war, and weary of repeated promises of timetables from Washington that were not fulfilled — permit the U.S. to withdraw in order? Will the Vietnamese be able "to take the ball and run with it?" The withdrawal is coming — and, although reluctantly at first, many Vietnamese now welcome it as much as the Americans, if it leaves them with a reasonable chance to survive.

The huge American machine, without which South Vietnam would have fallen to the Communists, is also muscle-bound. Intra-agency rivalry, the enormous logistics demands of any American operation, the indiscipline of a society that insists on going to war in a foreign country as though it were at home (PXs that sell everything from dog food to ladies' perfumes), represent almost as

much of the U.S. effort here as was its war-making and aid-giving potential.

Yet to pull it out on a timetable that would not allow the Vietnamese to take over with some overlap, would be disastrous. And there are problems of time and experience that cannot be hurried. Take one example: air-lift for the ARVN. It requires 28 months or so to train a Vietnamese helicopter crew. The numbers of technically-trained Vietnamese needed to do the job is great; and training only got under way when President Nixon came into office in January 1969. That means that the bulk of the trained men needed will not be available until the spring of next year.

Will a gap develop? That remains to be seen. Certainly there will be a continual pulling and hauling between the demands of American public opinion to get out, on the one hand, and the U.S. leadership's insistence that the 45,000 dead here shall not have died for nothing, that American strategy in the area shall not be jeopardized.

There is a growing consensus in the American establishment here that all American ground combat troops — except artillery — can be withdrawn by mid-1971. But the enormous American logistics backup will undoubtedly have to stay considerably longer, if the ARVN is to hold on. Air support in many areas, for example, is still eighty to ninety percent U.S. The whole supply system is largely in the hands of the Americans.

You cannot get any estimates from leading Americans here as to what they think might be absolute target numbers. But it is conceivable that with the rate of progress now visible, U.S. forces could be down to somewhere between 50,000 and 100,000 by mid-1972 with no impairment of Vietnam's ability to defend itself. That would be less than the U.S. contingent in Korea or West Germany today, sixteen years and 25 years, respectively, after the end of those wars.

* * * *

Yet, much depends on events in the next few months. Things have a way of coming full circle in the Vietnamese conflict.

Not long ago, I stood on top a hill on the Laos border in Central Vietnam (the northern part of what we mistakenly call South Vietnam). Below me was the airstrip of Cam Duc. As my helicopter landed, artillery pieces were booming — striking a hillside only a couple of miles away across the valley. A few minutes later, "Slickies" — the helicopter gun-ships — repeatedly tore into the foliage in the valley, only a quarter of a mile below.

I first came to Cam Duc in 1958 with President Ngo Dinh Diem. He took me there during a tour of the country to show me the importance of the place. Less than ten miles away is the Laos border. A trail comes down from Upper Laos, and branches off here. One branch takes a northerly direction back into the Republic of Vietnam's northern provinces, and eventually toward the port of Danang. Another trail goes south into the Do Xa, a mountain fastness that served the Vietminh in their war against the French, and was one of the base areas when the Communists built up their forces against Diem. Still another branch leads further south into the Southern Highlands plateau, the scene of the first great battles between the victorious Americans and the North Vietnamese in 1965.

Cam Duc was one of many strategic bases built by Diem in defiance of — or, at least, with mediocre support from — his American advisers at that time. Diem said repeatedly then that the infiltration of trained cadres and supplies for a guerrilla war, which the Communists would start against his regime, would be his principal problem in the future.

I went inside the "hooch" for a briefing, where a young Vietnamese colonel told me what was happening. A month earlier (mid-July), a Vietnamese regiment, followed by two American battalions, had re-occupied the airstrip. It had been abandoned at the low point in 1968 after the Communist Tet offensive.

The young officer, one of the new breed — English-speaking (despite his apologies), smartly dressed, and business-like — pointed out the routes. I smiled (behind my hand) when he said: "Route 14 here was built by Pres. . . . the former regime . . . to help us supply this base." (Despite a growing sympathy for

him, it is still not considered quite proper to say anything complimentary about the Diem regime.) "But it fell to the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese, who used it to get supplies into the lowlands to strike at Hue and Danang."

He took me outside and showed me bicycles fitted with crude bamboo sticks, which the North Vietnamese used to ferry supplies down a two-yard "road" they had built hidden under the jungle canopy into Vietnam from Laos. And he said that the North Vietnamese now had an all-weather road right up to the junction of the trails. In fact, his forward command post to the west had seen headlights at night as they drove supplies up to the border in Russian and Communist Chinese-made trucks. Had his troops or the Americans gone across the ten miles through uninhabited jungle to "zap" the enemy in Laos? No, he said, although U.S. B52s had bombed the road — with only partial success.

Would they eventually attack the road in Laos, I asked myself. Or would this young colonel and his men sit on Cam Duc — as the Americans had done all along the Cambodian border all those years — as victims of the willingness of the Communists totally to ignore Laotian sovereignty (and of the inability of Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma's neutralist government to do anything about it)? Would the North Vietnamese, hit so hard by the Cambodian campaign that had partially destroyed their sanctuaries there and the ability to strike across the border, be allowed now to build up the same kind of "secret" base areas along the whole Laotian border — so close to their own rear areas, and so near the narrow, heavily populated coastal strip of Central Vietnam that lies below the mountains and their protective canopy?

The answer, in part, came in late August when the American and South Vietnamese commands announced that after seven weeks they had again abandoned the Cam Duc base. U.S. officers were quoted as saying the operation had succeeded "in effectively disrupting enemy logistical operations and in destroying enemy supply depots prior to the onset of the monsoon (rainy) season." Yet it is clear that the action was essentially defensive, that it will probably

have to be taken again and again, as the North Vietnamese are left relatively free to continue their buildup in the whole area.

More than any other question, this is the one posed by what is now happening in Vietnam: Do the South Vietnamese continue to fight, as they have for more than a decade, an essentially defensive war with the tactical odds stacked against them? Many people here feel that Saigon must take the initiative, if it is to survive.

Much will depend, of course, on the Vietnamese leadership. President Thieu has come a long way from the days when he was just a member of the group of intriguing generals who toppled Diem with American initiative and support.

His major weakness, according to most of his friends and critics alike, is his tortured decision-making, which often leaves decisions unmade or problems unsolved. For example, he has divided economic decision-making among five different bodies, although questions of economic policy are the most pressing issue facing the regime now. More than one old acquaintance in Saigon — many of them not his admirers or friends — said the President ought to take a stronger line. Ironically, this came at a time when he was being criticized in the U.S. for being too dictatorial.

Thieu's other great problem is one that is hard to define, and even harder to see solved any time soon. It is the question of the legitimacy of his rule in the eyes of the Vietnamese people.

I recently dined with an older man, a former civil servant at the imperial court at Hue during the French time. He represents old, traditional, Confucianist Vietnam, although he was educated in French schools. As several of us talked during the evening, it was clear that his daughter, too, reflected his sense of values. And his son-in-law, now a young doctor-officer with the paratroopers in the field, but only a few years ago a participant in the student movement led by the An Quang Buddhists, also takes his stand on the old values.

To them as to so many others, Thieu is a soldier, the lowest order in the old society. He is a former officer in the French colonial army — although his brother and his family were prominent in the independence movement. He does not yet have, nor may he ever obtain, that mystical quality that the Confucianists call "the mantle of heaven," which makes it possible for a man to have complete acceptance as the national leader. Diem had it for so long because of his lifetime spent in the service of the country.

* * * *

Although there is widespread criticism of Thieu, there is a growing — if grudging — approval of his policies. His proposal for a cease-fire, which has not even been acknowledged by Hanoi in all its propaganda, much less accepted, is one of the growing proofs that the Saigon regime is a "peace" government. But it will not be peace at any price.

In Hue a few weeks ago, I asked about the mood of the city. As the former capital of the Empire of Annam, it has always been reluctant to follow Saigon's leadership. And it was here more than any place else in Vietnam — before the Communist Tet offensive in 1968 — that there were hopes of a negotiated settlement.

They were dashed by the wanton murder of civilians and even Buddhist monks by Viet Cong and North Vietnamese who gained entry to the city, and who came with prepared lists of victims. Probably no one will ever know how many people were killed, but the estimate is somewhere in the neighborhood of three thousand. The city administration, busy with so many other chores, has not had time to excavate the sites of mass graves of people shot by the Communists, nor to go through the long process of identification.

Only recently, in early August, the North Vietnamese Communist delegation in Paris rejected out of hand a proposal of the An Quang Buddhists for an unofficial peace conference. War weariness is enormous and includes almost everyone in the country. But you will find very few people who are willing to

settle for a Communist victory as the price of peace.

In fact, the undertone of most conversations in Saigon these days — punctuated with complaints about the government, the attitude of the Americans, the economic problem, the losses of family and property in the war — is the unspoken assumption that a Communist victory is no longer possible. The basic question is whether the Saigon government can rally a people who have been bled by almost 25 years of war and civil conflict to a program of rehabilitation and reconstruction — a program that must start even before the war is clearly over. Or, indeed, as President Nguyen Van Thieu told a group of us one evening at dinner, while 50,000 Communist troops may continue to fight indefinitely along the northern borders even if all goes well in the next few months.

That program of reconstruction may well get started — if the war de-escalates; if the North Vietnamese are forced to go back to guerrilla war, and give the Saigon regime a breathing space, as seems likely now; if the economic threat now hanging over the country can be dissipated with better administration and U.S. aid, so that the new forces of economic and social growth can flower, as they seem on the point of doing; and if the U.S. withdrawal continues at a rate that permits the Vietnamese to take over their own defense, so that security can be gradually extended throughout the country.

Those are all big if's. But I have seen two miracles in Vietnam. In 1954, Diem and his followers constructed the Republic of Vietnam south of the 17th parallel, which promised a measure of freedom and progress for half the country, against overwhelming odds. And in the winter of 1963-64, when that regime was swept away, somehow the Communists still did not take over.

That is why, despite the continued news of death and horror in Vietnam, I am hopeful that a relatively free, relatively strong South Vietnamese regime may come out of the present travail.