

Vietnam—another decade?

By MICHAEL PARKS

Saigon.

"Communist forces have suffered tremendous losses. They are hurting badly. They are capable of little more than harassment. . . . The South Vietnamese Army has 1.1 million men, all well trained. . . . Ninety-three, almost 94 per cent of the population lives under government control. The Viet Cong political structure is withering under government pressure. . . ."

The colonel, equipped with an endless series of statistics and dozens of multicolored charts, was briefing a VIP from Washington last month on the state of the war and the prospects for this year.

After the 20-minute spiel, the visitor asked, "Colonel, the only thing I am interested in really is—how long will it last?"

"When Will We Be Gone"

"Oh, the government of Vietnam and the Army will remain stable and solid long after we are gone," the colonel replied.

"No," the visitor said. "What I want to know is when will we be gone? How long will the war last?"

"I don't know, sir. It's hard to say."
How much longer?

Responsible American officials will not estimate (they remember the predictions and bogus optimism of the Johnson administration), but it is clear by what they

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believe still has to be done that they are thinking in terms of several years, perhaps even more than a decade, of substantial American participation and support here.

Vietnamization has permitted withdrawal of American troops, but it is not a strategy of withdrawal but of victory, the American aim appears to remain winning the war.

Moments Of Truth

Many United States and South Vietnamese officials expect 1971 to test that strategy. Among the anticipated moments of truth:

1. The withdrawal of at least 60,000 more U.S. troops by May.
2. The September presidential and legislative elections here.
3. Efforts to make the Vietnamese economy produce, not just consume.
4. Increased testing of the Saigon government's ability to govern without the support of almost one American adviser for each Vietnamese official.
5. The seesawing battle for Cambodia with the rising American profile there and the deteriorating military position of the government in Laos.
6. And, possibly but not probably, a cease-fire.

The unknown factor in each of these equations is the Communists' plans, which are assumed to call for protracted, low-level guerrilla warfare.

The picture is further clouded by the misleading use of relative internal standards to assess the state of the war. Because things may be better than they were does not mean they are, in fact, good.

The American establishment is cheered because the American ground combat role is shrinking. This, of course, means fewer American casualties, but it also means to them that the South Vietnamese Army must be better if it is able to carry the burden.

Military planners expect all U.S. ground troops to be out of day-to-day combat within six months and all U.S. forces to be out of active participation in the war in about 18 months. But some troops—South Vietnam has asked for 50,000—are expected to remain indefinitely, providing logistical and some air support and, implicitly, ready to bail the South Vietnamese out in an emergency.

Increasingly Vulnerable?

Fewer and fewer American troops has meant those remaining are increasingly vulnerable to enemy attack, according to U.S. officials. President Nixon's anxiety about this, and his pessimism over the prospects of the Paris peace talks, is the thread of concern linking each of his spectacular military ventures here this year—the invasion of Cambodia, the air strikes against North Vietnam and the abortive raid on the prisoner of war camp outside Hanoi. From the record, one can almost presume there will be more such actions.

Military planners are concentrating