

Saigon's New Chief Spokesman

Hoang Duc Nha

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By FOX BUTTERFIELD

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Jan. 10—When Hoang Duc Nha first proposed to his wife, Tam, her family vehemently opposed the marriage. "He is only a poor engineer working in a Government office, he has no future," friends recall that her parents said at the time.

They suggested a wealthy doctor instead. But she thought better of the tall, boyishly good-looking

Mr. Nha and agreed to the match—she was right.

At the early age of 31 Mr. Nha has quietly become the closest confidant of President Nguyen Van Thieu and, in the view of most knowledgeable Vietnamese, the most powerful man in the country after the President.

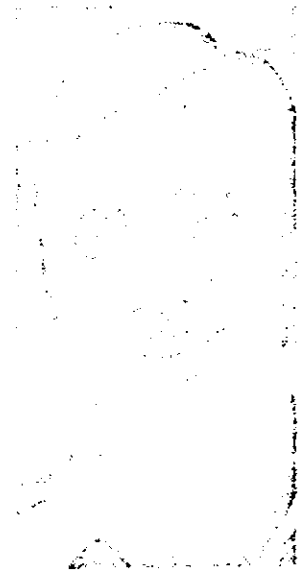
In a country that values family ties, it is not surprising that Mr. Nha is also President Thieu's cousin and adopted nephew.

A Hand in Everything

Disguised behind the unpretentious titles of press secretary and secretary to the President, Mr. Nha reportedly has a hand in everything from helping write Mr. Thieu's speeches to appointing ambassadors, to transferring generals. When Henry A. Kissinger came to Saigon in October to negotiate South Vietnam's agreement to the draft peace accord, Mr. Nha—who speaks fluent English—alone sat in with Mr. Thieu on the talks.

In fact, Mr. Nha appears to combine the roles played in Washington by Mr. Kissinger, Ronald L. Ziegler, the White House press secretary, and Charles G. (Bebe) Rebozo, President Nixon's closest friend.

Today Mr. Nha added another job—President Thieu's



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Said to have a part in every activity.

presidential press office, the national radio and television stations, and part of the army's powerful Political Warfare Department.

As commission general of state for information, with the rank of Cabinet minister, Mr. Nha will be responsible for an ambitious effort to build up the Government's propaganda machinery and counter the Communists in the event of a ceasefire. The Vietnamese name for his new office, translated literally, is Special Commission for Civic Proselytizing.

To many Vietnamese and Americans, Mr. Nha is a strange choice for the job. For a year, since Mr. Thieu's re-election as President in the fall of 1971, Mr. Nha has gradually broken off almost all contact with the large Saigon press corps, refusing to accept phone calls, never holding press conferences, and rebuffing all attempts to interview him.

His bad relations with Americans are ironic, because Mr. Thieu clearly values him as an expert in handling Americans. Mr. Nha graduated with a bachelor of science in electrical engineering from the University of Pittsburgh in 1966, and he affects many Western customs: driving a green Mustang, wearing well-tailored business suits in the latest fabrics, smoking expensive foreign cigarettes.

Mark of Greatness

One of Mr. Nha's few outwardly Vietnamese characteristics is his habit of allowing several long hairs to protrude from a prominent mole on his cheek. In Vietnamese tradition, it is a mark of manhood to become great.

Born into a family of small rice merchants in the central Vietnamese coastal province of Ninh Thuan, Mr. Nha has always been regarded as intelligent, articulate and a very quick learner. Although his family tie to President Thieu has undoubtedly helped lead to the President's trust in him, when he first went to work for Mr. Thieu in 1967, he was only one of several family members in the office, and friends say it was his ability that enabled him to outstrip the others.

Mr. Nha's wife is also American-educated, a graduate of the Oakland School of Art. Unlike the wives of many prominent Vietnamese, she takes little interest in business and spends her time at home painting bright abstract canvasses and taking care of their two children, a 4-year-old boy and a 2-year-old girl.

His Friends Do Well

Several of Mr. Nha's friends and family members have risen to power with him. His brother, Hoang Duc Ninh, a controversial figure,