

Statement of Dr. Clark Kerr, Chairman

National Committee for a Political Settlement in Vietnam

Room G-219, New Senate Office Building

Last week final action was taken to enact into law a land reform bill which will give the bulk of South Vietnam's farm land immediately to the several million Vietnamese now farming the land. This has been described as the most radical, revolutionary land reform program of this century. At long last the people of South Vietnam are being freed from dependence on landlords.

It is doubtful that this revolutionary event could ever have come about without the dedicated perseverance of a small group of private American citizens. Now that the land reform law is a fact, I wish to tell you some of the activities which helped bring it about.

In May 1968, our National Committee for a Political Settlement in Vietnam held a conference at Airlie House in Virginia. Present were 26 persons who possessed working knowledge of Vietnam and who were deeply concerned to find ways to a political settlement of the war. Two of the participants were Dr. Roy Prosterman, Professor of Law at the University of Washington, and Robert L. Coate, San Francisco businessman, then considered a ranking expert on land reform in both Asia and Latin America. Mr. Coate had been an independent observer at the Vietnamese elections in August 1967 and had returned to Vietnam twice by the time of the Airlie House Conference. Mr. Coate had gained both the acquaintance and confidence of a number of Vietnamese political leaders, including President Thieu, Senator Don and Deputy Chau. Prosterman and Coate first met at our Conference. Twenty-two months later their quiet, persistent work has achieved almost miraculous results.

Today many people feel that an individual can have no impact on his own political destiny, much less the political destiny of a nation. Those of us at the original Conference had no idea whether we could create and carry out any programs of legitimate usefulness. We each had endless frustration which is an inevitable part of attempting to change the ways things work.

Professor Prosterman had failed to gain any significant interest in either the U. S. State Department or the Agency for International Development, who had their own more cumbersome versions of land reform and discouraged by their failures, had virtually given up trying to achieve it. Once Prosterman and Coate established a working liaison they carried their thinking direct to Vietnamese leaders as well as to several U. S. Senators and Representatives.

It is interesting to note that Prosterman and Coate did not necessarily agree on the methods by which the war itself might be resolved; Prosterman and our Committee favored a total bombing halt and a supervised cease-fire by both sides with free elections open to everyone, while Coate favored systematic U. S. withdrawal. However, both agreed with the members of our Committee that land reform was absolutely essential to the well-being of the people of South Vietnam, and to the development of viable democratic institutions.

Last July, President Thieu introduced the simplified bill into the Vietnamese Legislature, almost intact as Professor Prosterman had written it. It was sent to the Lower House. There the political maneuvering became so intense that it appeared impossible that land reform could ever be achieved. Representatives in the Lower House approached the matter in much the manner of members of any legislative body. The bill, for all practical purposes, totally abolished landlords. Many of the Lower House members are landlords themselves. Various revisions and amendments were proposed - mainly designed to protect landlords' interests. Some of Thieu's opposition joined with the landlords to prevent enactment of a bill which, if passed, would strengthen and broaden Thieu's support.

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Mr. Coate had worked most closely with Representative Tran Ngoc Chau, leading vote-getter in the Lower House. The vindictive pursuit of Chau by Thieu made the whole land reform program seem even more hopeless. It is also interesting to note that while Chau was firmly in the oppositionist, pro-peace camp, he did not join the coalition to prevent the measure, which would strengthen Thieu, knowing the benefit it would bring to the peasants he represented in his own province.

The central argument used by both Prosterman and Coate was that any land reform program, to be effective, had to be simple and had to be total. Coate's point with the recalcitrant legislators was always to try to convince them that their own best interests would be served by passage. The Viet Cong had accomplished a deceptive version of land reform in several areas of South Vietnam - "deceptive" because occupation by the Communists would simply mean collectivism, as in North Vietnam, instead of ownership of land by the peasants himself - but this still could seem preferable to the corruption and coercion of the landlord system.

Lower House amendments, which gutted the bill, were voted down by the Senate. Finally, after months of delay and infighting both houses passed the bill in almost its original form.

Last week, it was signed into law. Land will immediately commence being given to the tenant occupying it. There will be no charge. Payment to landlords will be made by the government of Vietnam over a ten-year period. Total payments will come to about \$400 million, which is about what it costs to conduct the war for one week. The measure raises the status of a million families in the country and in their communities from inferiority, poverty, and dependence on landlords to one of dignity and independence.

Longer term effects on economic, social and political development can be profound. Free from exorbitant rents, the peasants can begin to acquire surplus funds, making possible a wide range of beneficial educational and cooperative enterprises. They can build schools and hire teachers. They can establish cooperatives for warehousing and credit. Land reform programs in other countries have led to increased rural literacy and fuller political participation by peasants. With a little surplus money to work with, the peasants can run for local offices, and move into the regional and national political picture.

An independent peasant bloc can mean creation of a new political base in the country, to which aspiring political leaders will have to appeal, thus strengthening the possibilities for effective political unity and a democratic process.

We are meeting this morning to celebrate the role of the private citizen and of organized groups of private citizens. With enough knowledge, perseverance and skill it is possible for dedicated people to have a profound effect upon the improvement of the human condition.

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