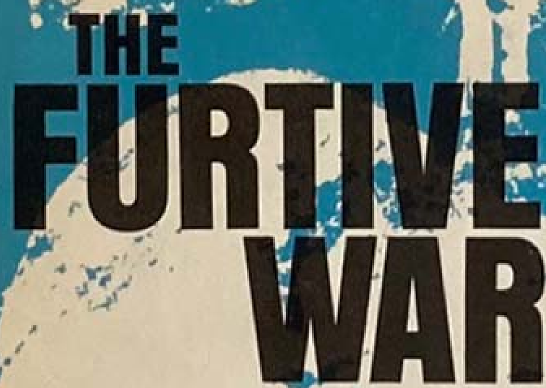


THE FURTIVE WAR

The United States in Vietnam and Laos

by Wilfred G. Burchett

THE FURTIVE WAR

The United States in Vietnam and Laos

By Wilfred G. Burchett

Published by International Publishers, New York 1963;
Library of Congree Catalog Card Number: 63-18721
Transcribed by Emerson Tung for marxists.org 2007.
Reformatted for pdf and A4 print, by E. H. 2022.

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

For a large part of my professional life I have watched wars waged in Asia. After riding a truck over the Burma Road more than twenty years ago to Chungking — then the world's most bombed capital — to report the Sino-Japanese war, I followed the trail of wrecked cities and burned villages through most of the countries of Asia and the Pacific area during World War II. Until the blood-soaked trail led to Hiroshima. ...There at least one thought it ended. But it soon started up again with the "dirty war" in Indo-China and the civil war on the China Mainland. Then the agony of the Korean war, with hardly a village or house north of the 38th parallel spared from high explosive or napalm.

I saw more than a fair share of blood and tears in those wars.

During two years at the Panmunjom ceasefire talks to end the war in Korea and three months at the 1954 Geneva conference to halt the fighting in Indo-China, I have seen how difficult it is to quench the flames of war, so easily kindled. After those painfully negotiated Panmunjom and Geneva agreements, it seemed Asia could breathe again, could relax and heal the war wounds. For two and a half years after the Geneva Agreements, I travelled in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia to watch the application — often enough the non-application — of those Agreements.

In the first half of 1962, I revisited the former states of Indo-China. By then it was an open war in Laos and a quiet war in South Vietnam that were the focus of world attention.

On questions of war and peace, it is difficult to be impartial and dispassionate. The book that follows sticks to carefully verified and verifiable facts that throw light on dark places in Southeast Asia. I was able to seek the opinions of South-east Asian leaders most directly concerned with present-day problems, including the Laotian princes; Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia; President Ho Chi Minh and Premier Pham Van Dong of North Vietnam; Professor Nguyen Van Hieu, Secretary General of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, and many others.

If the book contributes to finding the end of the war trail in Asia, it will have served its purpose.

W. G. Burchett

CONTENTS

Author's Preface ... *2*

Part One: Vietnam ... **4**

CHAPTER I: Operation Sunrise ... 6

CHAPTER II: Background to A "Quiet War" ... 22

CHAPTER III: War Against Trees ... 36

CHAPTER IV: Personalism and Personalities ... 54

CHAPTER V: Liberation Front ... 68

CHAPTER VI: Minority Rights and Wrongs ... 81

CHAPTER VII: Back to Dien Bien Phu ... 95

CHAPTER VIII: North Looks South ... 103

Part Two: Laos in Perspective ... **115**

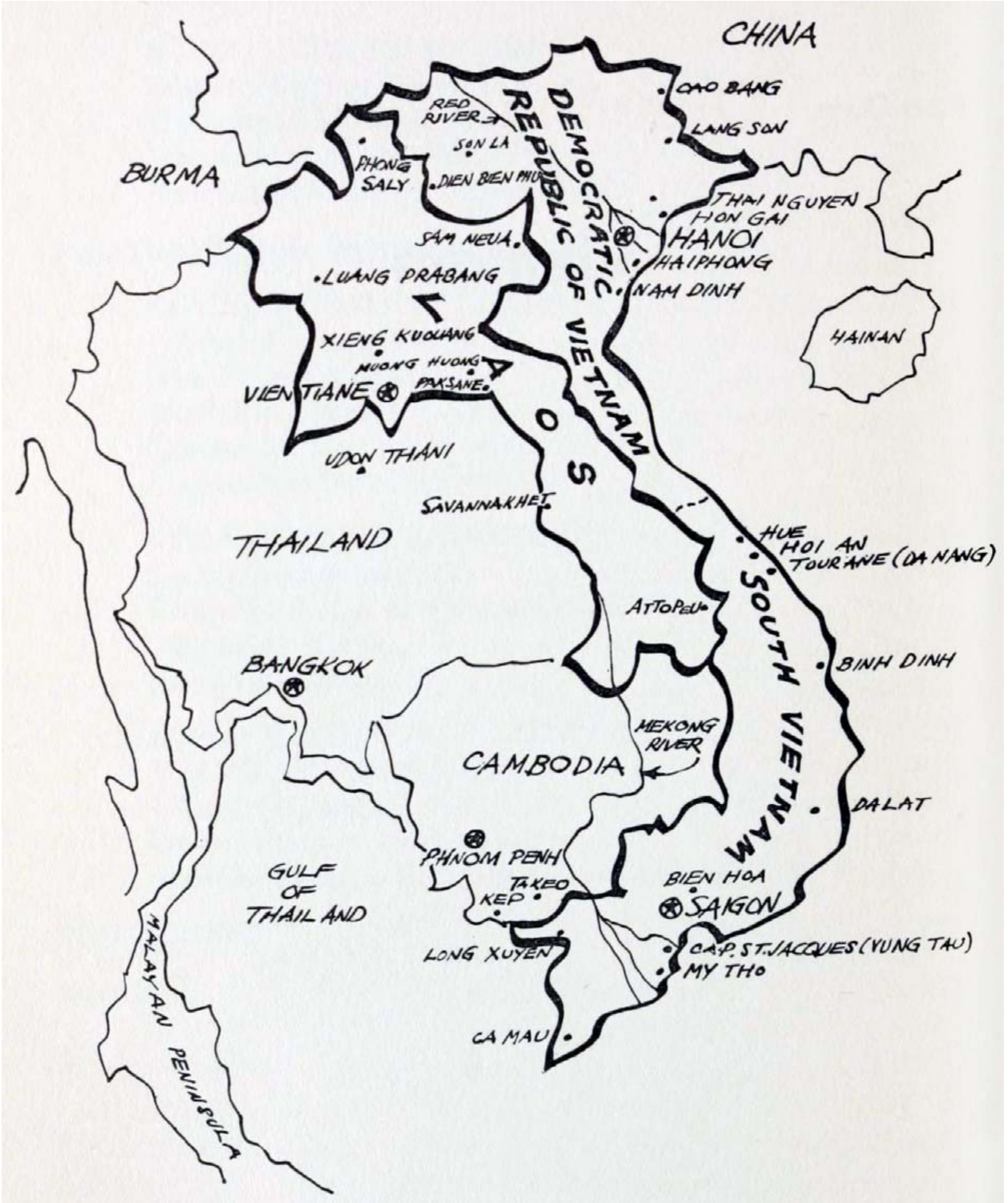
CHAPTER IX: Counter-Revolution ... 116

CHAPTER X: Stranger than Fiction ... 126

CHAPTER XI: Hard Road to Victory in Laos ... 138

Postscript ... *152*

Part One: VIETNAM


CHINA
CAO BANG
LANG SON
RED RIVER
SON LA
PHONG SALY
DIEN BIEN PHU
BURMA
DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM
THAI NGUYEN
HON GAI
HANOI
HAIPHONG
NAM DINH
SAM NEUA
LUANG PRABANG
LAOS
XIENG KUOUANG
MUONG HUONG
PAKSANE
VIENTIANE
HAINAN
UDON THANI
SAVANNAKHET
THAILAND
HUE
HOI AN
TOURANE (DA NANG)
SOUTH VIETNAM
ATTOPEU
BANGKOK
BINH DINH
MEKONG RIVER
CAMBODIA
DALAT
PHNOM PENH
GULF OF THAILAND
TAKEO
KEP
BIEN HOA
SAIGON
LONG XUYEN
CAP. ST. JACQUES (VUNG TAU)
MY THO
CA MAU
MALAYAN PENINSULA

CHAPTER I: OPERATION SUNRISE

"Resettlement"

Under a couple of huge, shady trees in a pagoda courtyard, a few hundred men, women, and children stood around listlessly or squatted on the ground in little groups. They had the lost, hopeless air of the uprooted. The road that led past the pagoda and across a broad fertile valley was lined with decorative sugar palms, straight slim trunks topped with a perfectly round tuft of fronds. They ended abruptly at a bridge beyond which jungle-covered mountains in a light blue haze rose up from the valley.

The road was the main Saigon-Phnom Penh highway. The mountains were in An Giang province of South Vietnam; the pagoda was at Phnom Den, in Cambodia's Takeo province. The people were Khmer Krom (Cambodian minority) refugees from the dictatorship of President Ngo Dinh Diem across the frontier in South Vietnam. They looked at me and my companion, who was the Cambodian governor of Takeo province, with a sad, questioning apathy.

"The new element among the refugees," said Governor In Tam, "is the arrival of many women and children. Before it was almost exclusively men. In this batch of 429, for instance, 284 are women and children."'

One group of about 30 black-clad women sat apart from the others on a low stone wall and the Governor explained they had arrived only a couple of days previously. I asked why, and one woman with close-cropped hair and pinched cheeks was prodded by the others into replying. She looked about 50, but in fact was much younger.

"We are all from Tray Tung village, in An Giang province," she said, indicating the rest of the little group. "We came here to avoid being grabbed for Diem's army. Since last December, the Diemists have started taking women between 18 and 35 years."

"You've left your husbands and families to avoid conscription?" I asked. Some of them began sobbing at this point, but the woman spoke up:

"The Diemists tried to make us move our village. Some army men came a few weeks ago and said we had to regroup with some other villages in a big center a few miles away. We protested. Where would we get water for our rice fields? There was no river where they wanted us to move to. They said we had to go anyway. It was President Diem's order. Finally, they agreed that if every family contributed 1,000 piastres[1] our village would be spared. We didn't all have that much money. But the poor sold some

[1] About $14.00, American. Since devaluation in 1961, one U.S. dollar equals 72 South Vietnam piastres.

things or borrowed from the better off and we paid the money. The troops went away and we were very relieved.

"A few days later another lot came and told us to move immediately. We explained we had paid to remain where we were. The commander said he knew nothing about that. There was a direct order from President Diem and we must start moving immediately. While we were still protesting, he ordered his troops to start demolishing our houses — and they did, even cutting down the fruit trees. Anyone who protested at this was grabbed and beaten up or tortured. One of my neighbors was given electric torture from an instrument with a handle. The faster they turned the handle, the more terrible were the screams. This was done in front of us all. Another old man who tried to intervene was beaten to death on the spot.

"It was late in the day by then and we said we would move, but only early next morning. The commander seemed relieved about that. But after dark, the whole village left for the forest. We had to abandon everything."

"Where are your men-folk?" I asked.

"They're in the forest, trying to avoid being rounded up by the Diem troops," she replied. "A meeting was held and it was decided to send us over here with the younger children, because if we were captured we would be shoved either into the army or into a concentration camp."

"You see how Diem manufactures 'Viet Cong'?" said the Governor, who was acting as my interpreter.[2] "What was a peaceful village a few days ago has now become a group of desperate people, pushed into resistance. That's the way it's developing everywhere over there."

The next I spoke to was a Buddhist bonze, a dignified figure in his yellow robes, with a sensitive, intelligent face.

"Our people are being massacred right and left," he said. "Peaceful villages are being uprooted; rice fields and orchards destroyed; the people herded behind barbed wire — their pigs and poultry pillaged by Diem's troops. The peasantry is forced to live under the guns of Diem's military posts."

I asked why he had fled.

"I was chief bonze at our pagoda," he said, "and some months ago I was arrested and accused of having 'ideas' and contacts with the 'Viet Cong.' I was released but warned that if I were arrested again, I would be killed. About a week ago, Diem's militia came to the pagoda to arrest me. I was not there, but they told the other bonzes that unless 15,000 piastres were produced immediately, I would be arrested as soon as I turned up.

---

[2] "Viet Cong" is a term used by Diem and the Americans to denote anyone in opposition to the regime. There is no such organization, nor any group of people who call themselves by this name. The words are a shortened version for Vietnamese Communists.

Of course the pagoda could not raise such a sum. The commander ordered his troops to start firing into the village. They killed two people and everyone else fled into the forest. Then the Diemists burned down the village."

"Did you have contact with the 'Viet Cong'?" I asked.

"Who are the 'Viet Cong'?" he replied, and then added with great dignity: "I will reply to you as I replied to the Diemist militia a few months ago. Those whom they call the 'Viet Cong' are our own people. Some of them have been forced to take to the jungle to defend themselves. Such people have come to our village at night to get food. They pay for what they take — not like the Diemists who loot and kill. If they come to the pagoda — yes, I will talk to them. That is my duty.

"That there exists what are called 'Viet Cong' is due to the crimes of the Diemists. With Khmer minority people the repression is doubly severe. Although the villages where we come from are 90 percent Khmer, we are forbidden to use our own tongue. Our schools have all been closed — even the Pali language school at Tra Vinh. The Diemists try and force us even to change our names. With the slaughter of our people, the destruction of our villages, the repression of our culture and language, it seems our people are to be exterminated."

It was impossible not to be moved by the grave words of this bonze. His clear depthless brown eyes, the sad somber tones as he spoke of the sufferings of his people, his dignity and quiet voice made an even deeper impression on me than what he had to say. It was clear from the hushed silence as he spoke that he had great authority among the rest of the refugees.

The Governor addressed a few words to a fragile wisp of a man who was nursing his left arm. "His arm was paralyzed when he arrived," said the Governor. The man had a terrible story to tell.

"The Diemists tortured me very badly," he said. "First they tied my hands behind my back and left me hanging from a tree by my bound wrists. For several hours they left me there, swinging in the sun. Then they cut the rope so I fell to the ground. They forced water down my nostrils till my stomach swelled up and then kicked and trampled on my stomach to pump the water out of me. Then they used the electric torture — on my genitals. After that I was unconscious for hours. When I came to, they tied me up to a branch again, this time my bound hands straight above my head and a stool under my feet that I could just touch with the tips of my toes. Later they kicked the stool away and started to beat me as I swung from the tree. It was after that, that my arm got paralyzed. And all the time questions and questions."

"What did they want to know? Why did they torture you?" I asked.

"They wanted me to confess that I was chief of the village 'Viet Cong.' And to disclose where I had hidden my weapons."

Governor In Tarn looked at this hollow-cheeked wreck of a man and turned to me: "Do you think a man like that could be a 'Viet Cong' chief?"

"Were you?" I asked. "Even if not the chief, were you with the 'Viet Cong? You're safe over here and can speak freely." "I was not a chief of anything nor a member of anything," he replied. "They promised to stop the torture as soon as I confessed and told them where I had hidden the weapons. But how could I find a weapon, even to stop the torture, when I had none. They can call anyone a 'Viet Cong' and who can prove you're not. But who could produce a weapon when you don't have any." "How did it all start?" I asked.

"The Diem militia came and demanded we move our village to be near one of their military posts. We objected and they said it was to protect us from the 'Viet Cong'. We said the 'Viet Cong' never bothered us and that if the government wanted to help us, the best thing was just let us stay in our old villages and till the land we had always tilled. The commander ordered the troops to encircle the village and then without warning they started firing. Everyone that could tried to flee into the jungle, but a lot of us were caught. Then they started killing the buffalo and pigs and looting the houses. One of my old friends who couldn't leave his house was bayoneted in the stomach. Then they burned the village down. Because I was one of the first to explain that we didn't want to leave the village and the 'Viet Cong' had never harmed us, they decided I was the 'Viet Cong' chief. All I did was try to explain to them what was right."

Relatives of the unfortunate peasant raised the tremendous sum for any small village, 20,000 piastres, to get him released.

He was warned that if he were ever again arrested, he would be executed immediately.

"So I came here," he said, and concluded: "If they want 'Viet Cong', they've got them now from our village. All the younger men are in the forest making arms."

There were many more similar stories. Those present came from over 30 villages in An Giang province, all of which had to be uprooted as part of the insane "resettlement" plan which Diem and the Americans were trying to impose on South Vietnam in early 1962.

I left this sad-faced group of people, wondering as I often did during my visit to Southeast Asia, what all my good decent American friends would think if they could sit down and talk with such people and learn what was going on in the name of "freedom" and "justice" with U.S. arms and dollars.

News Black-out

That U.S. policy was to black out as far as possible what it is up to in South Vietnam is obvious. In this respect there was an interesting Associated Press despatch from Saigon, carried in the *New York Times* of March 24, 1962, which said in part:

One of the battles being fought in South Vietnam involves the problem of finding out what is going on and reporting it to the people of the United States. Many correspondents here feel that they are losing. One put it this way:

> "The Vietnamese government is against us. They figure we are all spies or Communist propagandists. The United States will not tell us much beyond the broad outlines of their policy and we cannot even be sure of that. After prying for weeks to get a story from unofficial sources, we may end up being blocked by the censors."
>
> Underlying the efforts of correspondents is the belief, among some at least, that Vietnam could become the cradle of a more widespread war.

This outburst of rare frankness from AP went on to describe attacks on the press by Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu — the publicity-seeking sister-in-law and official hostess of dictator Diem: "You all act as if you were spectators here. Don't you realize you are with us?" The despatch then makes its most telling point:

> The United States Government is eager to avoid alienating the South Vietnamese Government, and its official sources are closely coordinated with official Vietnamese sources. For various reasons, the United States also is seeking to avoid press emphasis on the role it is playing here. . . . United States officials are reluctant to show newsmen military operations in which United States servicemen *are performing combat duties.* (Author's italics).

The date on this revealing despatch is not accidental. On the day it was written, two correspondents of conservative American journals were ordered expelled from Saigon by the Diem regime for having dared expose something of what was going on in the country. One was *Newsweek* correspondent, Francois Sully; the other was Homer Bigart of the *New York Times*, twice winner of the Pulitzer Prize, America's most coveted award in journalism. While it is certain that the expulsion of any journalists who were not entirely conformist was something devoutly desired by the U.S. military and CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) chief in Saigon, the expulsion of someone of Bigart's standing — even leaving aside his *New York Times* connection — would be something more than the U.S. State Department could cope with. The U.S. Embassy was instructed to make it clear to Diem that the expulsion of Bigart would do more harm to the U.S.-Diem cause than any articles he might write. The expulsion order was withdrawn against him and subsequently also against Sully, after the latter's colleagues had created a scandal so big that the State Department was forced to support him as well.

Sully was in fact expelled some months later, in early September 1962, by which time U.S. State Department pressures on the *New York Times* resulted in Bigart also being recalled from Saigon. *Newsweek*, owned by the *Washington Post*, commenting on the expulsion of Sully in its September 17 issue, reported:

> Six U.S. correspondents covering South Vietnam's war against the Viet Cong Communist guerillas were haled before Assistant Defense Minister Nguyen Dinh Thuan one day last week for a polite but pointed lecture. Reporting the war, the Defense Minister stressed, would henceforth mean concentrating on Vietnamese victories over the Communists, not defeats by them. He left no doubt in the newsmen's minds, as one later said, that they were to "shape up or ship out." The American newsmen had been called on the Nguyen carpet for one simple reason: They had all sent identical protests to President Kennedy and Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem expressing "deep concern" over the expulsion last week of *Newsweek*'s Francois Sully. . . .
>
> For their part, Sully's fellow newsmen protested that since "the United States alone is spending here more than 11,000,000 a day and had stationed 10,000 of its finest young me in Vietnam" to aid in the anti-Communist struggle, "the American people cannot be denied access to any views or information concerning the war here."

The correspondents and *Newsweek* could have gone one step further and pointed out that as the U.S. government at that time was footing 80 percent of Diem's military budget and a U.S. Command was directing military operations, Bigart could not have been recalled or Sully expelled unless the real instructions came from Washington.

In any case this incident lent all the more interest to Bigart's despatches, many of which are factual and objective — and under the circumstance courageous.

Staley Plan Villages

When the publicity-conscious U.S Army and officialdom suddenly become coy and shy of publicizing what they are doing, it is time to get suspicious and probe around for what is really happening. One of the operations the United States is not anxious to publicize is the "Staley Plan" (described in further detail in Chapter III), a part of which was hinted at in a communique (issued July 11, 1961) about recommendations "for a series of actions in the military-internal security and economic-social fields, to be undertaken jointly by the Vietnamese and U.S. governments."

The "series of actions" were aimed at carving South Vietnam up into huge concentration camps, isolated from each other by "white zones" in which every village and hut and every plot of food crops would be destroyed. South Vietnam itself would be isolated from its neighbors by a mile-wide swath of emptiness, stretching from the 17th parallel to the Gulf of Thailand, along the frontiers with Laos and Cambodia. All forest

and villages within this no man's land would be destroyed by napalm on the villages and chemicals on forest and crops. Within so-called "prosperity zones," the poetic term coined for the major units of concentration, would be established "strategic villages" — groups of hamlets surrounded by a series of high bamboo palisades separated by mine-filled moats, mud walls around the outer fence, and barbed wire around the mud walls. Pill-boxes are to be set up at the only authorized entry and exits. The Staley Plan was a hotch-potch of similar Japanese schemes in North China; British efforts in Kenya and Malaya; U.S.-sponsored attempts by General Henri-Eugene Navarre to set up concentration camp settlements in North Vietnam, and Diem's own unsuccessful attempts at fortified "agrovilles" in the South.

One of Diem's first attempts had been in the regions just south of the 17th parallel. By massing his armed forces and police, he succeeded in uprooting villages in the area south of the demarcation line and setting up some "strategic villages" — to serve as models later for Dr. Staley.

At a refugee reception center near the 17th parallel, Le Thi Mien, a wan-faced, attractive young woman who had arrived a few days previously from Hai Chieu village, only a few kilometres south of the demarcation line, told me something of life in a prototype Staley Plan village.

"There are 140 families in our village," she said. "Round the outside, we were forced to build five rows of bamboo fences. Each is about two yards above the ground and the bamboos are pointed into sharp spikes at the top. In between the fences are deep ditches and in some of these the Diemists laid mines. Outside the fifth fence there is barbed wire. Inside, three to five houses are grouped together, each group surrounded by another, single palisade. But if a group of houses has 'Viet Cong' suspects then the fence has to be doubled or trebled, according to the category of suspect. No one can move outside these groups at night, except the guards.

"Each of the grouped families must pay 60 piastres for a gong and a lamp on a stick. If a suspected 'Viet Cong' arrives to visit anyone, or there are any visits between the groups, this must immediately be reported to the group chief, appointed by the Diemists. He must then sound the gong and if it is at night, he must hoist the lighted lamp over the house where the suspected 'Viet Cong' is. Everybody must rush out and try and grab him.

"During the daytime, the women must do guard duty. At night, it is the youth and older men. They all have to sleep around the house of the village chief as best they can, and take turns to guard the village and especially the chief's house. Each of the family groups has to take turns to do guard duty in the daytime — they must report any stranger approaching or visiting the village. At night, the women are concentrated in one of the houses of the group. At a certain moment, the gong is struck and we must move immediately. We are given only a few minutes to concentrate till dawn. This is

supposedly because many of us have husbands who regrouped in the North and the Diemists fear they might try to visit us at night. Of course there are often alerts at night, with people rushing everywhere they think a light is burning. Usually it's a false alarm...

As to why she had risked a bullet in the back by flight and an illegal frontier crossing, the melancholy-faced young woman said: "I just could not stand it any longer. What with being locked up behind barbed wire, with forced labor, no freedom to earn or even to live — I preferred the risk of death. Eight of us, all from one group of houses, decided to make a break for it. We just didn't come back from the fields one day. We hid in the forest till late at night, then managed to cross the Ben Hai." (The Ben Hai river acts as the demarcation line between North and South Vietnam, along the 17th parallel.)

In one of a series of supplementary U.S.-Diem agreements relating to the Staley Plan, published on January 4, 1962, it was stated that "special efforts will also be taken to enable the Montagnard population in the high plateau, to share progress in this region with their Vietnamese compatriots. Resettlement will be accelerated where necessary to remove the population from 'Viet Cong' pressures."

To the uninitiated, this is merely another innocent-sounding provision.

Along Cambodia's northeastern borders which are adjacent to the *Hants Plateaux*, where most of the South Vietnamese ethnic minorities live, I met a group of refugees of the Jarai minority. They were from Hung Dien district of Cong Turn province. Nyao Hlung, a round-faced girl with lively, coal-black eyes, wearing the national dress of her people — white blouse and almost ankle-length, black skirt — told me how the people from her hamlet were forced to leave their mountain home and together with three other minority hamlets, concentrate with a Vietnamese village in the valley.

"We protested," she said. "We pointed out that our health suffers in the valley. We are used to the clearer air of the plateau. Also our customs are different from the Khin (Vietnamese) people. They have irrigated paddy fields. We cultivate the 'ray'[3] for our rice and maize. But the Diemists insisted we move. A delegation was sent to the district chief, but he said: 'This is an order from President Diem himself. If you resist you'll be guillotined on the spot or sent to prison for life.' So we had to move.

"The new village was surrounded by bamboo hedges and barbed wire. Every now and again, Diem troops came to raid the villages, taking young men for the army and girls for their brothels.

"Those who resisted were tortured publicly. My brother and his friend were taken. They tried to flee, but the Diemists caught them, tied them up and burned their hands in front of everyone. Then they dragged them off, hitting them with their guns as they went. No one knows what happened to them."

---

[3] Hillside patches, where seed is dropped into holes in the ground, after the undergrowth has been cleared by burning.

On one occasion when the village was tipped off that a raid was to be made, pretty Nyao Hlung covered her face with dirt, matted her hair, and made herself sick by swallowing certain leaves. She pretended to be very ill when the press-gang started searching the houses, and was spared. The next time she heard a press-gang was on its way, she fled, wandering for weeks in the jungle before she finally crossed into Cambodia.

In reading the dry words of these descriptions of resettlement techniques and their results, a dispassionate reader could perhaps discount them as exaggerated tales of malcontents who have fled the country. It is impossible to put down on paper all the circumstances and the atmosphere, the thousand and one details and nuances that lent a terrible authenticity to these accounts. Nyao Hlung's story did not come out in the lucid, connected way I have presented it. She is an illiterate tribal girl, naturally intelligent and with a sharp eye for detail. Her story, however, had to be pieced together from hundreds of answers to my questions, questions based a little on previous accounts I had heard which gave a general picture. I have chosen a few of the "average" ones to write about, not the "horror" stories; not the most dramatic ones which might have been colored by too recent association with events; or where facts might have been distorted by translation difficulties — often through three or more languages.

I interviewed several scores of people from all over South Vietnam. The notes on this one subject of concentration camp villages, alone, would fill a much larger book than this one. Typing up these notes later, I did have an occasional doubt, mainly, because like most people, I have a built-in resistance to accepting facts about man's inhumanity to man. But in the quiet of my office, seven or eight thousand miles removed from the emotional atmosphere inevitably present in interviews with people so close to the events they described, I was able to compare what I had learned from people on the receiving end of these policies and what experienced observers on the spot, on the other side of the frontier, had seen and heard without benefit of the intimate interviews I had made. The two versions fitted each other as a hand fits into a well-tailored glove. It was the final confirmation that what I learned was only too horribly correct.

As a source completely free of any sympathy towards "Viet Cong" or of any suspicion of "Leftism," the *New York Times* must be considered impeccable. A series of reports from their Saigon correspondent, Homer Bigart, one of America's most experienced foreign reporters, which cover precisely the same period as my own investigations, show the same picture.

On March 28, 1962, for instance, Bigart sent a report on "Operation Sunrise," a typically cynical label the Americans put on their first great operation to form concentration camp villages. His story is from Ben Cat in Binh Duong province, north of Saigon:

> Deep in a rubber plantation four miles north of here, South Vietnamese and Americans are engaged in an important test in isolating the rural population from the Viet Cong Communist guerillas.
>
> This experiment is crucial to the success of Operation Sunrise, the first comprehensive plan to pacify South Vietnam... This operation is subsidized directly with United States money, military planning and technical aid. In this region, 1,200 families are to be moved voluntarily or forcibly from the forests controlled by the Viet Cong and resettled in new strategic villages. The abandoned villages will be burned to deprive the Viet Cong of shelter and food...
>
> The first step in Operation Sunrise involved encirclement of a half dozen settlements. Government forces failed to make the manoeuvre a complete surprise; a hundred guerillas were able to flee the forest before the ring was closed. The troops met slight resistance. Two guerillas were killed...
>
> The Government was able to persuade only seventy families to volunteer for resettlement. The 135 other families in the half dozen settlements were herded forcibly from their homes...
>
> Some families had been allowed to carry away beds, tables and benches before their homes were burned. Others had almost nothing but the clothes on their backs. A young woman stood expressionless as she recounted how the troops burned the families' two tons of rice. She was overheard by a man in black peasant garb. He had identified himself as an army psychological warfare lieutenant. He cautioned the woman's listeners that she was "very bad" and that the burned rice was probably Viet Cong stores.

Bigart did not say, probably could not say, what happened to the "very bad" young woman. By all the accounts I heard, she would have been tortured near to death and either finished off with a bullet or thrown into prison for a few years.

Some *New York Times* readers understood the point quite clearly. A letter signed by a Mr. Richard B. Du Boff of Philadelphia appeared in the April 5 number of the same paper:

> Thanks to the Times and Homer Bigart's reporting, we now learn that our U.S. "advisory" group in South Vietnam is attempting the first "comprehensive plan to pacify" this nation — by forcibly removing families, burning their livestock and crops and "resettling" these families themselves.
>
> The deadly parallel between this plan and "la pacification de l'Algerie" indicates that the Pentagon has apparently learned nothing from the French experience.
>
> But what of our civilian leaders? Does this "liberal" administration realize that no amount of advertising publicity can mask the fact that we are used to totalitarian philosophy, concentration camps ("camps de régroupement," the French army

> called them), and sheer terror to shore up a moribund regime. Not even the President can maintain that the responsibility is not ours.

Bigart's was an honest report and the reaction of Du Boff was that of any ordinary, decent citizen outraged at his country's involvement in such a dirty business as imposing by force of arms a fascist regime on the peasantry of a country 10,000 miles away. With barely disguised irony, Bigart followed up this first report with another from Saigon on April 3.

> The United States, besides subsidizing compensation for the Vietnamese peasants uprooted in Operation Sunrise, will give them a free weekly newspaper, telling why they were forced to move. It will also include news briefs and latest soccer results.
>
> Produced by the United States Information Service, the paper, named Towards the Good Life, is being distributed to families in the Ben Cat district of Binh Duong Province, north of Saigon. About 200 families have been escorted there from isolated hamlets... Thousands more face compulsory relocation in ten provinces surrounding Saigon...

Any village, hut, man, buffalo, or food crop outside the concentration camp villages in fact becomes a target for American napalm or chemical spraying. Those who refuse to be concentrated or who even protest are automatically marked down as "Viet Cong," for eventual extermination under Law 10/59.[4] Lest there be any doubt that the U.S. government is primarily responsible for this atrocious attempt to uproot a whole nation, there is another revealing despatch from Bigart, dated April 6, 1962, from Saigon.

> General Paul D. Harkins, head of the U.S. military command here, said today that president Ngo Dinh Diem had adopted two concepts of major importance in the struggle against the Communist guerillas.
>
> General Harkins said Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem had approved the so-called delta plan for pacification of the ten provinces surrounding Saigon and had also agreed that a single military chain of command, divorced from political interference, was essential to the smooth running of the South Vietnamese military force.

The second point meant in effect that the American staff headquarters had taken over operational command of the South Vietnamese military forces and were not accountable to any South Vietnamese civilian body. Diem's armed forces had become an appendage of a foreign invasion force, removed from any vestige of Vietnamese control.

---

[4] This law adopted in October, 1959, provides for death or life imprisonment as the only two punishments for those tried within its scope. It is dealt with at greater length in a subsequent chapter.

Failure of ''Pacification"

What emerged from every one of Bigart's despatches was that the whole population resisted being moved. Who can speak of "voluntary" resettlement, even by the few families which did not have to be removed forcibly, with the display of armed force described by those with whom I spoke and confirmed in the despatches of Bigart and others? The whole population opposed the action and the majority resisted it physically despite the display and brutal employ of armed force. One can be sure that on the few operations that Bigart and other correspondents were permitted to witness, restraint was ordered to avoid too much unfavorable publicity. When there were no such witnesses around, people were shot down like dogs.

Those described as guerillas and "Viet Cong" were simply people resorting to mankind's oldest privilege — the right to defend home and family. All despatches agree that their weapons at first were the most primitive — hoes, bamboo spears, sickles. Later these were supplemented by mines, grenades, rough bazookas, etc. made in jungle arsenals, and as the struggle developed, these in turn were supplemented by American weapons, wrested from the enemy in desperate hand-to-hand combat or captured in ambush attacks. What was taking place was the classical beginnings of a people's war, something the South Vietnamese people were forced to wage. They had no alternative but to live as concentration camp slaves, die under the guillotine, or fight back. What people worthy the name would not choose the latter?

The theory behind the formation of "strategic villages" and "prosperity zones" was simple. Guerillas and people were one. The Americans and the Diemists could not fight a guerilla war because the people were not with them. When Saigon radio commented on the despatch of U.S. "guerilla experts" to Vietnam, a French colonel who happened to be at my side, remarked drily: "I hope they're bringing their own population with them, their own eyes and ears. Otherwise they'll soon find out what real guerilla warfare means." By concentrating the peasants in "strategic villages," the Americans hoped to isolate the guerillas from the people, the people from the guerillas. They would then force the latter to fight their sort of war; to come out into the open and oppose American artillery, tanks, and planes with their primitive weapons. This was the heart and soul of the Staley Plan and the reason why Diem rushed a bill through the National Assembly setting as an "urgent national task" the formation of some 16,000 "strategic villages." In a population of 14,000,000, this means nothing less than dividing the whole country into concentration camps, each containing about 900 people. This has nothing to do with protecting them from "Viet Cong"; it is tacit acceptance that those who are called "Viet Cong" are in fact the entire population, each small unit of which must be isolated from each other unit.

It is an attempt to turn the country back into the Middle Ages by employing the most terrifying of modern techniques. It is a scheme worthy perhaps of the obscurantist

fanatic that is Ngo Dinh Diem but monstrous as a conception of a country like the United States.

How right were the Melbourne dockers who, in June 1962, refused to load barbed wire when they found it was bound for South Vietnam. "Barbed wire! Concentration camps!" said the first docker who noticed the destination. How correct his suspicions! The shipment was destined to help put an entire country behind barbed wire, something unparalleled in history. The protest act was in keeping with the great progressive traditions of the Australian dockers, dating back from the days when they smuggled Communards ashore from French transports in the 1870's, saving dozens of them from slow death in the convict colony of New Caledonia. This new gesture will not be forgotten in South Vietnam, where it was taken as the first act of international solidarity with the South Vietnamese people in their desperate struggle. It will long be remembered, just as was the unswerving support given by Australian dockers and other trade unions for the Indonesian people in their war of liberation against the Dutch.

Plans however remain plans until they are fulfilled. General Harkins may have been satisfied when Diem "approved" his pacification plan, but the only approval that really counted was that of the people. And they wholeheartedly disapproved. Three weeks after the start of Operation Sunrise, another despatch (April 20, 1962) from Bigart made this clearer than ever.

> Vietnamese peasants in Binh Duong province remain fearful of Government plans to resettle them. During the last three days, 142 more families have been removed, voluntarily or forcibly, from several isolated settlements in the forests north of Ben Cat. Their houses were burned by government troops... They have been promised compensation [the equivalent of $21.00 for those who moved voluntarily] and new land at the village of Ben Ding So, where the Government says they must live...
>
> Failure to spread sufficient information on the reasons for the removals have been blamed for the passive resistance encountered by Vietnamese troops when they surrounded the settlements. Few men of fighting age were taken. Apparently they had slipped into the forest on the approach of Government forces.

It was clear, in fact, from this account and the stories I heard at the frontier, that each action by the U.S.-Diem troops produces a fresh crop of young men of fighting age who take to the forest — and armed resistance. Bigart goes on to report that Americans who inquired why "explanation leaflets" had not been dropped to reassure the population before the action, were told: "It was feared the families might bolt into the woods if they suspected troops were coming and that leaflets might forewarn them." So much for the confidence the people felt towards the Diem regime.

Another three weeks elapsed and U.S. Defense Secretary Robert McNamara was in Saigon, according to Bigart (the *New York Times*, May 10, 1962), expressing "impatience over the slow application of an approved plan for the pacification of the Mekong River

delta provinces and vexation over political interference with the military chain of command." There was more than a touch of arrogance in this U.S. irritability that "approved plans" had not been carried out. However in compensation and as a promise of better things in the future, the report says Mr. McNamara was entertained at a Civil Guard training center where he watched "a platoon of girls shoot at bottles and balloons. Drums in the village beat a mock alarm and from the top of an earthen parapet, Mr. McNamara observed fighter planes dropping napalm bombs and firing rockets at imagined enemy forces on a near-by hill."

Before counting too much on the loyalty of the press-ganged girls shooting at balloons and bottles or the authenticity of any model "strategic villages" he was shown, the Defense Secretary would have done well to study a statement from some of the officers of the elite American-trained para-troop regiment which revolted and seized Saigon in a short-lived coup in November 1961. They were referring to a situation which existed before the Staley "acceleration" plan went into operation, but the situation remained much the same.

> Ngo Dinh Diem has often staged a lying propaganda farce about the concentration camp "agrovilles" to deceive foreign observers and visitors [said the officers, now in exile in Cambodia]. Before each visit, this trickery is prepared scientifically and down to the minutest detail by Diem's most faithful agents. The people, the animals, goods in the shops and even fruit trees and food crops, have been transported from one place to another to be used as stage props for the "prosperity" farce of flourishing "agrovilles" — a constant theme of Diemist propaganda. People are escorted there by armed Civil Guards and rehearsed to applaud the President. Immediately after these official visits, there remains only the miserable, deserted face of the "agroville." The people, exhausted and disgusted are escorted back to their homes under the black eyes of Diemist rifles.

No "approval" by Diem, McNamara, Harkins or anyone else could change the fact that the people themselves, resisted — refused to be concentrated. American official attempts to prove this was due to "subversion" or "infiltration" from North Vietnam were absurd. No one needed any outside instructions to resist the sort of regime U.S. arms were trying to impose. Apart from any other factors, the area where the main U.S.-Diem drive was taking place was in the extreme south of the country, the area furthest removed from any possible contact with Hanoi, capital of North Vietnam.

The provinces where the main action was taking place had been the most solidly-liberated zones in South Vietnam during the latter years of the resistance war against the French. When Diem started his all-out onslaught against former resistance members, from 1955 onwards, the people turned back to their old self-defense organizations. The Diem administration virtually ceased to function in the Mekong delta area. From 1959, Diem's troops — even at that time with U.S. advisers helping to run the show — carried

out raids and "mopping up" operations on an ever bigger scale. They cut great swaths through the population wherever they went by indiscriminate massacres and arrests, but the people's organizations closed in again behind them as they passed. They never succeeded in breaking the spirit, or the organization, of the delta people. In some areas, sectors were split up into series of squares, each containing one or two hundred families. Diem's "pacification" teams swept square after square, killing and arresting former resistance members as they went. But neither troops nor officials dared stay in the area. Raids could be made with massive concentration of forces; Diem's troops could murder and pillage — but never occupy. They always liked to be back in a safe base by nightfall!

These "pacification" attempts were often large-scale military operations. According to evidence submitted to the International Control Commission (comprising India, Poland, and Canada and set up to check on the application of the Geneva Agreements) troops at divisional strength had been employed at least ten times; at regimental strength at least 30 times and at battalion strength a least 50 times in "pacification" drives up till 1959. The Times of Saigon on October 3, 1959, quoted General Meyers, deputy chief of MAAG (Military Aid and Advisory Group) at the time, summing up operations during the previous year, as follows: "If I remember well, out of ten divisions, six were thrown into the fighting, 13 local regiments were put into action to a greater or lesser extent, over half the logistics services participated with the support of the entire river services of the Navy."

All-out warfare in others words, not against a foreign invader but against patriots specifically for having taken part in the resistance movement which liberated their country from the French and — incidentally — made it possible for Diem to be where he is today. The failure in those years to wipe out the former resistance members or break their spirit is the real background to the attempt in 1962 to force them all into concentration camps.

Since direct U.S. intervention started at the end of 1961, operations have been stepped up with the use of fighter-escorted, helicopter-borne troops dropped suddenly on a target area to deprive the villagers of their natural warning system.

In mid-May, it was announced that Operation Sea Swallow had been started in Phu Yen, a coastal province about 300 miles northeast of Saigon. It was to be a sister project to Operation Sunrise, and would receive the same U.S. financial and military support. The whole province had been split up into yellow, blue, and red zones: red for "Viet Cong" controlled areas; blue for those under dispute, and yellow for Diem controlled. The first $70,000 was to be spent on fortifying villages in the yellow zone. Then an attempt would be made to bring the blue zone under control and finally an all-out assault would be launched to "pacify" the red zone. To help achieve this, a special "Sea Swallow" unit of the most bloodthirsty cut-throats from Chiang Kai-shek remnant

troops, who had been living from banditry in Burma and Thailand, was set up under a Chinese Catholic priest, Nguyen Lac Hao, with a detachment of U.S. marines at their disposal. This unit has outdone all others in ferocity and the technique of terror.

Such plans as "Sea Swallow" look fine on paper and doubtless delight the hearts of "guerilla experts" sitting in a Pentagon office, but as the French discovered years ago and the Americans in South Vietnam were beginning to discover, the inevitable result of such operations is that the map soon shows only a red zone.

Despite all the blood that had been spilt and the hundreds of millions of dollars invested, the overall plan for concentration camp villages looked a bleak failure by mid-1962. The Staley Plan, incidentally, called for "pacification" within 18 months. Time was running out and so was territory — from the hands of the Diem administration. The original U.S.-Diem project which the Staley Plan was to "accelerate" called for setting up 116 "prosperity zones" — but the maximum number formed was only 29 and by mid-1962 the figure had been reduced to 13, shrinking monthly. In the rest, the peasants had revolted, burned their prison barracks, and returned either to their former villages or set up new homes in the forest and mountains. Diem's administration by this time did not function in more than about 12 percent of the villages in the Nam Bo.[5] In the *Hants Plateaux* area which comprises most of the western part of South Vietnam, Diem controlled less than eight percent of the villages. This is the homeland of the ethnic minorities and one thing that surprised French observers, who knew Vietnam well, was that Diem had lost control of these regions.

"At least we had some roots and loyalties among the minority peoples," said the French colonel, referred to earlier. "But Diem and the Americans between them have pushed them all into the arms of the 'Viet Cong.' Our policy, in general, was to keep the minorities divided. Diem at least has succeeded in uniting them. But," he added with an ironic laugh, "against himself." The colonel could have gone further and said that Diem and his U.S. mentors had succeeded in uniting the whole people of South Vietnam — against the Americans.

[5] Nam Bo is the lower part of South Vietnam, formerly known as Cochin China. Trung Bo, which is now divided by the demarcation line at the 17th parallel, is the former Annam, and with Bac Bo, the former Tonking in the upper part of North Vietnam, these three zones comprise all of Vietnam.

CHAPTER II: BACKGROUND TO A "QUIET WAR"

The Case of Tran Thi Nham

Sitting opposite to me was one of the most beautiful young women I have ever seen. A perfect, flawless beauty by any country's standards, classical, but warm and feminine too. She was tall for a Vietnamese, but with a perfectly proportioned body, an oval face, skin like silk, a generous mouth that frequently curved into a tender, half-humorous smile; rows of teeth as white and even as young maize grains. Above all, it was the big, depthless jet-black eyes that held the attention. There was something special there, sad and haunting. Her dark hair fell sheer and gleaming to the waist except for a few strands that curved round her shoulders to frame the oval face. A soft, low voice was in keeping with the rest.

I asked her to bare her right shoulder — and quickly asked her to cover it again. I wanted to vomit. The satiny skin ended in small cauliflower-like eruptions where the flesh had been torn out with red-hot pincers. There were half a dozen searing scars on the upper part of the arm.

I could not bring myself to ask a detailed recital of the origin of the scars; I knew already from her doctors. But why, why? Even if there were no other reasons to restrain torturers, the pure beauty of this girl should have stayed the hands of any but monsters. In a quarter of a century of reporting, often in rough enough places, I had never come across any individual act that so shocked the senses. Why, Why?

"I lived in the hamlet of Dien Hong," she said in her soft, quiet voice. "That's about 25 miles from Tourane. This was in 1955 when it was understood there would be elections for reunification the next year. There was a movement all over the country asking for a start to preparations. But also, a number of people who had taken part in the resistance to the French colonialists had been murdered in Duy Xuyen district, where our hamlet was, and about 8,000 arrested. So all the villagers get together and signed a petition protesting the murders and arrests and asking for a start to be made in the election preparations. As I was a big, strong girl and it was quite a walk to Tourane, I was elected to take the petition and drop it into a box outside the office of the International Control Commission (ICC). I was used to walking," and her mouth curved into a reminiscent smile. "During the war against the French, from the time I was 13, I used to act as a messenger girl, maintaining liaison between the guerillas and the regular army. So, I walked for a day and a night and delivered the petition.

"About a month later, two companies of troops came to our hamlet. Some were regular troops, some from the Saigon mobile police. I was out in the field with my

mother, gathering mulberry leaves for our silk worms. When we got home, some of the police were waiting in our house. They tied me up and threw me into the local prison for the night. Next day they took me off to the town of Hoi An, and started to torture me. They wanted me to confess that I was a Communist, left behind when the army withdrew to the North, to carry out subversive activities. I said I was a peasant girl who had fought against the French and now all I wanted was to grow rice, do my weaving, and look after our silk worms. Between the torture and beatings, they kept shoving a declaration in front of me, saying if I signed it they would release me. I said the French had tortured me too, but I never betrayed any secrets. This time, I said, I had no secrets to betray anyway.

"This went on for three months. I never signed anything. Then they released me. But a few weeks later they arrested me again and tortured me, then let me go again. They did this only to watch my every move, to see who I visited and who visited me. They kept searching our house. Once a security agent got very angry and said: 'We know you're up to no good. Who are you in liaison with?' I replied: 'You can see for yourselves — the only people that visit me are the police.'

"July 1956 came and went and there were no elections as we had been promised. Repression became worse after then. One day I came home, and there were two security agents from Saigon waiting for me. They handcuffed me and started to drag me off. A big crowd of people collected and protested, but other police drove them back. I was dragged through the crowd and thrown into an American police van. This time I was taken to the town of Faifo, and for months on end I was tortured very badly."

What the doctors learned and what an investigating team from the International Control Commission also learned later was that for months on end Tran Thi Nham was subject to the most fiendish tortures. They included: soapy water and urine forced down the mouth and nostrils; electricity applied to vagina and breast nipples; flesh torn from the breasts, thighs, and shoulders by red hot pincers; a ruler thrust into the vagina. These were interspersed with beatings, starvation, and "milder" forms of torture.

"Once I recovered consciousness and found I was stark naked, blood oozing from wounds all over my body. There were others in the cell. I heard a woman moaning, and in the half dark saw a woman in a pool of blood. She had been beaten into having a miscarriage. Then I made out an old man. An eye had been gouged out and he was dying. Alongside him was a 13 or 14-year old boy, also dead; a little further away another dead youth with his head split open. They had thrown me in there hoping the sight of this would break me down.

"All they wanted was my signature on a piece of paper to say that I had been left behind as a 'Communist agent' when the People's Army withdrew to the North. Then the beating and torture would stop. I knew this was only a trick anyway. If I signed, then

they would stage some farce of a public trial with my 'confession' the key document. They would kill me in any case.

"They left me naked once for 20 days without a drop of water or food. But comrades in my cell each tore bits off their own clothes so I could cover myself. They smuggled me something from their own miserable rations.

"In the end they thought they had killed me. I had been unconscious for a long time. They threw me outside for the prison coolies to bury. The coolies carried me off, it seems, and were about to bury me when they discovered my heart was still beating. It was their custom in such cases to report burial but smuggle the bodies off to some local inhabitants. This is what happened to me. Some local people looked after me for a few days and then I was passed back, a little at a time to the North, carried all the way for hundreds of miles."

It took over a year to get her to safety north of the 17th parallel — a tiny flicker of life maintained by peasants forcing food down her throat and obtaining for her any medical attention available in the dozens of villages through which she was smuggled. When she arrived in Hanoi, in September 1958, she weighed 66 pounds — 44 pounds less than when she was arrested. She was bleeding from over 40 wounds, her reproductive organs wrecked for all time. She lay for three months in a Hanoi hospital without regaining consciousness. An ICC team interrogated her when she was strong enough, and then took up the case with the Diem officials on the spot. First, they inquired as to the whereabouts of Tran Thi Nham. The officials, certain that the girl lay buried a few hundred yards away, protested they knew nothing of the case. No such person had ever existed on the police records. The ICC team then produced photos and Tran Thi Nham's statement. Witnesses were called, and the real facts as Tran Thi Nham had stated them, came out.

I interviewed her more than five years after her agonies. She was still bleeding from two of her wounds and had been under constant medical attention from the day she was carried into North Vietnam.

"What were your first thoughts when you knew you were in the North?" I asked.

"When I recovered consciousness the first time, I thought I was still in the South — but wondered how I could possibly be in a fine hospital. Then a nurse came and I knew. Of course I was terribly overjoyed. I couldn't believe it was not a dream. At first I was happier than ever before in my life. Then I was immediately sad again because I thought of the sufferings of my compatriots, especially those in the same prison where I was tortured."

I asked about her family. The gentle, soft eyes filled with tears and she turned her head away. "My mother and sister were arrested soon after I was," she said. "I know that my younger sister was terribly tortured like me and if she is alive she is still in Tourane prison. I never heard anything more about my mother after she was arrested."

Tran Thi Nham asked me about my own family, especially about children. When I talked about them, there was that haunting almost hungry look in her eyes. It was my turn to avert my head. Her torturers had ensured that she could never have a child, the greatest misfortune to any Vietnamese girl.

Diem's War Against the Resistance

The case of Tran Thi Nham was one that could properly be confirmed by the ICC. But there were thousands and tens of thousands of others which could either not be brought to the notice of the ICC or could not be investigated due to obstruction by the Diem authorities.

This latter fact was noted by the Commission in almost every report it issued, especially reports No. 4 to 9 covering the period from April 11, 1955, to January 31, 1959. In this period, having been able to investigate only a tiny fraction of cases reported, the ICC confirmed that in 42 cases, including 2,749 persons killed, wounded or arrested, there had been acts of reprisals against former resistance workers, constituting a grave violation of Article 14 (c) of the Geneva Agreement. This clause specifically forbids discrimination or reprisals of any sort against those who had fought with one side or the other during the resistance war. Data giving names, locations, dates, and, in most cases, names of those concerned, submitted to the ICC by the liaison office of the Vietnam People's Army (VPA)[6] for the same period listed 4,971 killed, 10,185 injured, and 183,843 arrested. And arrest, even if only for 24 hours, means torture in South Vietnam.

In order to understand what is going on in South Vietnam today it is essential to have some knowledge of what went on in the years immediately after the ceasefire, some background of what made possible the tragedy of a Tran Thi Nham.

Diem seems to have decided from the very first days that if he was going to set up the fascist regime he wanted, then he must wipe out all potential opposition. In the first months after the ceasefire he struck out blindly at what seemed to him his obvious opponents. His army attacked the pro-French armed religious sects, the Binh Xuyen, Cao Dai, and Hoa Hao; his assassins struck down indiscriminately pro-French personalities, progressives, suspected Communists. This was the period of eliminating the French, replacing French influence and presence by U.S. influence and presence. Long before the French withdrew their expeditionary force in April 1956, Diem found he had still another opponent to deal with — the people. To deal with them, he started an organized campaign against former resistance workers.

---

[6] The army of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, that is, North Vietnam.

Under the terms of the Geneva Agreement, the Vietnam People's Army withdrew from the South and regrouped in the North; the French withdrew from the North and re-grouped in the South in the first few months after the ceasefire. Incidentally, this was envisaged exclusively as a means of separating the combatant forces. In the light of subsequent events, it seems that Diem and his U.S. advisers, incapable of accepting the concept of a people's war and all that entails, believed that the VPA was the only real resistance force. Once it had been withdrawn, Diem would have a free hand to do as he liked. They could not have been more wrong.

In fact, except for those villages physically occupied by the French, everybody from ten-year-old child liaison workers onwards took part in the resistance! There were 30-odd resistance organizations in which, apart from the very young and very old and a handful of landlords, everyone was enrolled. The regular VPA, regional troops, village guerillas, and the people were one. The people as a whole actively participated in the armed struggle. How otherwise could a few dozen men armed with flintlocks, cross-bows, and bamboo spears in mid-1940 develop into the force which defeated France's mighty expeditionary force and the cream of her generals 14 years later?

After the indiscriminate killings and arrests, Diem with the aid of special U.S. police advisers and his brothers Nhu and Can, put repression on a more organized basis. A nationwide "Campaign to Denounce Communists" was launched in June 1955. At the head of a Central Committee to run the campaign was Ngo Dinh Diem himself. People in every town and village were forced to take part in meetings and denounce any who had taken part in the resistance. Failure to denounce anyone on the lists of Diem's secret police meant automatic arrest. An attempt was made to place the entire population of South Vietnam in one of three categories.

(1) Illegal citizens or "A" category who had taken an active part in the resistance; had been active afterwards in agitating for the elections provided for in the Geneva Agree-ment, or had been associated with the peace movement.

(2) Semi-legal citizens or "B" category related to or friends of "A" category citizens, or related to former resistance workers regrouped in the North.

(3) Legal citizens or "C" category who did not fall within the previous two categories and who, if the formula were strictly applied would mean the few traitors who fought against the resistance and were zealots of Diem's fascist regime.

Replying to ICC investigations regarding the arrest of 110 former resistance members in Quang Tri province, Deputy Governor Bui Quang Dyen told ICC Team 57: "After the ceasefire, the national government has to keep former resistance members under surveillance by the national army. A list of former resistance members has been drawn up. We have to arrest them by all means possible in order to have them under our control and ensure security of the region." A conception which was a most flagrant violation of the Geneva Agreement and any standards of human rights.

In some provinces citizens of Categories "A" and "B" were issued red identity cards to distinguish them from "legal" citizens with white cards.

The "Denounce Communists" campaign was conducted as a combined military operation, with districts cordoned off, the population from several villages rounded up and forced to concentrate in a designated point for anything up to ten days. Work in the fields, even at rice-planting or harvest time, had to be dropped. First thing was to listen to a Diem police document on what constituted "legal" and "illegal" resistance against the French. In the first few months of the campaign, Diem's agents soon found that everyone was claiming with justified pride to have taken part in the resistance and quoting even statements of Diem himself posing as a resistance hero. So a document on policy toward resistance was concocted.

"Legal" resisters meant people like Diem who had stayed on at their posts or fled the country, thus "passively" resisting the French or who had "actively" helped kick out the French after the Geneva Agreement. "Illegal" resisters were those who had taken up arms against "legal" government in the days of French occupation. After listening to this fantastically argued document and being warned as to the consequences of non-cooperation or falsehood, people were expected to come forth and denounce the "illegal" resisters.

There were always a few agents planted in the crowd to set the ball rolling by denouncing some of those on the secret police lists. Any who tried to deny "facts" produced by such agents were arrested and often beaten up on the spot. Denunciation in itself was sufficient grounds for arrest in many cases. Prisons and concentration camps were crammed with the victims of each operation. Others were listed for future actions.

A Diem government document, "Five Years of Government Achievements," published in Saigon in October 1959, lists eight major "Denounce Communists" campaigns between June 5, 1955, and February 1, 1959, engulfing virtually the whole country. Usually about one month was allotted to each province with the regular army taking part, plus all the militia, police, and civil guards that could be mobilized in district after district as every village and hamlet was combed to ensure no one slipped through the net. In regions where the resistance against the French had been particularly well organized, up to three months was allotted for one province. Planes and artillery were used against villages where the inhabitants were "uncooperative."

The ICC control teams confirmed cases of individual and mass murders, atrocious tortures, and wholesale arrests as a result of these campaigns. But more frequently, the ICC was prevented from investigating. On several occasions, even when an investigation was permitted, Diem's agents — with the help of some cooperative foreigners — pretended to be the ICC team taking evidence. Any witnesses who presented themselves were dead or behind bars by the time the real team arrived. The ICC reports note numerous occasions on which Diem officials refused to give any assurance that reprisals

would not be taken against witnesses; on other occasions Diem's troops within sight of an ICC team forcibly prevented witnesses from giving evidence.

During the course of these campaigns, women were forced to divorce husbands who had regrouped to the North; parents to disown their children, children to disown their re-groupee parents! "Divorce weeks" were arranged in some provinces, in others wives were given a set period in which to remarry; otherwise they would be listed in the "A" category.

An old friend of mine, who arrived with the first boatload of VPA men to regroup to the North after the 1954 ceasefire, showed me a letter from a friend in his wife's village. She had remained behind, expecting the family to be reunited after the July 1956 elections. The letter was dated September 30, 1960, but had taken over a year to arrive in the hands of my friend. It was from Binh Dinh, a coastal province about 400 miles northeast of Saigon, and had probably been passed on by fishermen.

"After every campaign, the house is empty. There's nobody left to feed the pigs or poultry, to harvest the rice, to take the saumur [fish essence indispensable for the Vietnamese cuisine] to market. The children have to sleep with neighbors. And these repressions are repeated four or five times a year, each time for four or five days but sometimes even a whole month. Last year for example, the enemy carried out a control that lasted from October 25 until January 31 of this year. During this period, I was forced to stay at the district center, and the rest of the time under surveillance at the commune headquarters or in the hamlet. [The commune, often referred to, is the French administrative term for a group of hamlets.] In general the family of anyone regrouped, or a 'suspect' has to live like this. For the children, they have to go in groups and sleep with their mothers — who are also grouped together. Sometimes when they cannot be left with the neighbors, they have to follow their mothers to commune or district centers and live 'concentrated' for 15 days in a month.

"There was nothing much to celebrate 'Tet' [Vietnamese lunar New Year holiday celebrated like Western Christmas] with this year....

"Last year they built a police station here. Men had to contribute one month, women 15 days unpaid labor. If you preferred to pay, a man had to pay 15, a woman 10 piastres for each working day. For the 'Denounce Communists' fund, every voter must pay anything from 100 to 2,000 piastres — even more for some. I paid 500 but they're still not satisfied. Work it out for yourself and you'll see that in our commune there are a few thousand voters. An average is 200 piastres per voter. Look what even one commune has to pay out....

"Every family has to buy a photo of Diem and the three-barred flag. You have to change photo and flag every year. The photo itself is 5 piastres but if you don't want to appear suspect, you add another 25 to have it under glass. The flag costs 30 and another

3 for the cane to stick it on." He lists a great number of other taxes and forced contributions in money, and continues:

"For corvée, each person must provide 45 work days, plus 18 days and 70 nights doing surveillance and guard [spying on neighbors under the pretext of protecting the hamlet against 'Viet Cong']. For our hamlet, as we have 102 'party members', 'suspects', or 'families of regroupees', we must reckon on lots of extra money and extra days and nights of unpaid labor.

"As for the control slip where we have to write down our own names and those of our friends, it costs only 5 piastres but it takes you a full day to get it from the district center. Those in 'A' category, have to 'study' for seven days at district and two days at commune level every year. But apart from that, any time a problem crops up, we're forced to go off and 'study' again and they are likely to drag us off on 'periodic' or 'unexpected' work projects. In 1959, men had to live under surveillance in our hamlet for 240 nights, the women for 85 nights."

Living "under surveillance" means being grouped together from sunset to dawn in some sort of barracks at hamlet or commune level with Diemist agents on guard to ensure there will be no "subversive" contacts between them or with the outside world.

By early 1959, it was clear that the "Denounce Communists" campaign was a failure in its main task of terrorizing the population into accepting Diemist policies. In many, many places the meetings had been used to denounce the Diem regime. The summary arrest of those who did this only aroused the anger and hostility of the population. The campaign filled the prisons and concentration camps, but as the military police teams swept through the provinces, they left a trail of bitterness and hostility behind even in these regions where the regime had been passively accepted before. Any normal government would have drawn the conclusion that repression and violence were not paying off, a new policy was needed. But not Diem and his U.S. advisers. Their formula was to intensify the violence, make it more efficient, and put it on a legal basis.

Law 10/59

On May 6, 1959, a law was enacted which Hitler would have been proud to have fathered. This was the notorious Law 10/59 officially aimed at wiping out the "Viet Cong" — the name arbitrarily given about that time to anyone who opposed the regime. Law 10/59 is simply to give legal cover for the type of indiscriminate assassinations that took place in the first months after the ceasefire, but on a mass scale. Under it, special military courts are set up by the Ministry of Defense. Court personnel from judges on down are military; proceedings can take place without any preliminary inquiry; the accused receives his summons 24 hours before the court sits; there are only two types of punishment — death and life imprisonment.

Accompanying the courts as they move from district to district are mobile guillotines. In theory there is an appeal to President Diem against the death sentence — there is none against life imprisonment — but in practice, executions are carried out immediately, on the spot. An appeal to Diem would be a mockery. A summons is served if the accused "commits or intends to commit crimes with the aim of sabotage, or of infringing upon the security of the State, or of injuring the life or property of the people." Who can prove that he does not "intend" to throw a bomb one day at Ngo Dinh Diem if a police agent swears there is such an intention?

The courts dispense with any such formalities as material evidence, examination of witnesses, rights of defense to call witnesses, and the like. They prefer a straight-out denunciation, quick verdict, and immediate execution. Right of defense is purely theoretical. What poor peasant could organize a legal defense when a summons is served only 24 hours before the court sits and he learns the real charges against him only in court? By mid-1959, such tribunals with mobile guillotines trundling after them were moving through the provinces of South Vietnam in a manner reminiscent of the notorious "Bloody Assizes" of England's "Hanging Judge Jeffreys," who moved across the face of West England in the 17th century, leaving a trail of hanged, drawn, and quartered victims to mark his passage. That such a massacre of justice could be repeated in the mid-20th century is comment enough on the Diem regime and the U.S. government that has taken it entirely under its protection.

Law 10/59 is a fascist law, the only parallel for which are the measures the Nazis introduced in their occupied territories. Its introduction was preceded by a series of articles that appeared from February 21 to March 31, 1959, in Diem's main mouthpiece, the *Cach Mang Quoc Gia* (National Revolution) daily. They outlined a new program of intensified repression, the first article setting the tone by stating: "Let us mercilessly wipe out the Viet Cong as if we were in a state of war with them, no longer considering them as human beings." What was termed the "radiating" plan envisaged concentrating all military, paramilitary, and police forces in a selected number of centers; then radiating out from the centers in a combination of regular military tactics with mobile groups to encircle and raid suspect areas, wiping out the "Viet Cong" as they went. Lists of former resistance members, compiled during the "Denounce Communists" campaign, would be supplemented by names supplied by secret informers in the villages — the latter were guaranteed payment and protection for their services, including resettlement in provincial towns if they so desired. Once the lists were compiled, raids on several neighboring areas were to be launched simultaneously and those on the lists exterminated. Great attention was given in this plan — which immediately became official policy — to setting up a secret information network in towns and villages.

> South Vietnam will be divided into several zones [the paper stated]. If we have enough forces and troops, we shall carry out the plan simultaneously throughout the

> country. Otherwise, we shall delimit a few particular zones — they may include several provinces — where we shall succeed in wiping out the Viet Cong. The Zones will be divided into operational sectors, each of which will be entrusted to particular units....
>
> After the elimination of the Viet Cong from a village, the administration will be reorganized, chiefly in the field of security in order to consolidate it and to make the return of the Viet Cong impossible.

This "reorganization" in fact entailed setting up concentration camp villages and zones, camouflaged under various terms such as agricultural colonies, agrovilles, prosperity zones, strategic villages.

"Before carrying out the plan," the account continues, "census registers are to be duly established in villages and districts." The "census registers" are of course merely to make the business of wiping out suspected "Viet Cong" faster and more efficient.

The *Cach Mang Quoc Gia* plan also advised the setting up of special military tribunals of the type constituted a few months later under Law 10/59.

Within a matter of months the plan was being applied. Open war, in fact, had been launched against the population of South Vietnam by its own government. It is worth recalling that at this time there was no armed resistance to the Diem regime. Large-scale military operations were being launched against a defenseless population for exclusively political reasons. Armed resistance came later, in self-defense against the undeclared war.

By mid-1960, the degree of police control over every family had reached monstrous proportions. On January 26, 1961, General Vo Nguyen Giap, Commander-in-Chief of the VPA, sent a letter to the Chairman of the ICC, drawing attention to Diem's plan to divide the population of Saigon up into 10,687 "inter-family" groups for mutual espionage purposes. Each group consists of five families with a Diem nominee at the head. Groups are organized in "inter-groups," with collective responsibility for political "misdemeanors" of any of the members. Posted up in front of each house, must be a list of regular members of the family — those actually present and those absent, with names and professions of any visitors. The head of each group and inter-group is responsible for reporting to the police visits of strangers or any "suspicious" activities. By May 1960, according to General Giap's letter, 6,040 such inter-family groups had been set up in Saigon. Similar steps were taken in other cities.

> Large-scale military operations carried out from Ca Mau to the 17th parallel, from the plains to the High Plateaux [said General Giap in his letter to the ICC Chairman], are clear illustrations of putting into practice the "radiating tactics." South Vietnam has been divided into many zones of operation. ... In each of these, there is a "delegate of the Government" endowed with full powers to carry out "the mustering of all the operating forces in one or several centers under the leadership of a central

> body." At present, Nguyen Van Vang is the "delegate of the Government" in west Nam Bo and Ngo Dinh Can [brother of Ngo Dinh Diem] in Trung Bo. ...
>
> The operations in the above-mentioned zones involved on an average 10,000 to 15,000 regular troops, including the air force, navy, and artillery; and an equivalent strength of militia men, civil guards, commandos, agents of the "Cong dan vu" [secret police], and other security agents. They resulted in tragic massacres of unarmed, innocent people although peace had been restored; the victims were either burnt by napalm bombs, or guillotined before thousands of spectators; others had their heads cut off and planted on banana trunks set adrift in rivers.

Apart from arming, financing, and advising these operations, the U.S. government provided specialized help by training Diemist police agents in the United States and sent a special mission to Saigon to reorganize police methods there and especially to improve their system of dossiers and control lists. There is every reason to believe the "inter-family" system was one of the novelties introduced by U.S. police advisers; it is an adaptation of a similar system they helped introduce in Kuomintang China.

However, some of the specialists sent to Saigon by Michigan State University, who "taught the police how to maintain identification records," according to the New York Times, February 21, 1962, found Diem's police methods a little hard to stomach. After six years' work, the paper says, the mission was closed down by Diem, because some of the specialists had returned to the United States and written anti-Diem articles: "Their articles depicted South Vietnam as an absolute dictatorship and suggested an end to all United States aid unless President Ngo Dinh Diem dissolved his family oligarchy, released political prisoners, introduced a free press, free elections, freedom of movement and undertook economic reforms."

Diem's Prisons

As for conditions in the Diem prisons, even before the undeclared war started, a revealing statement was made in the South Vietnam National Assembly on January 3, 1958, by a courageous MP, Tran Ngoc Ban, who was afterward arrested:

"Let us take one room among so many others at the Gia Dinh prison, 45 feet long by a little under 11 feet wide. In this area are generally packed 150 detainees. Simple arithmetic shows us that there is room for three persons per square meter. It is in this place that the detainees sleep, eat, wash themselves, and ease their bowels. A bucket with a lid is put in the corner of the room for that purpose. It suffices that each of the 150 prisoners uses it once a day for five minutes and the bucket would remain open over 12 hours. . . .

"Now let us speak of possibilities for sitting or lying down. ... Squatting they have just enough room; sitting cross-legged they are very cramped. At night they can just sleep

lying with their knees under their chin. So a quarter of the detainees have to stand up to allow the others to stretch out for a moment. It is a fraternal gesture but also a necessity. Because of the sweltering heat... many detainees are unable to bear wearing a garment and remain half-naked. They must live day and night in this room and only go out into the courtyard once a day for a meal, which is taken outside even in rainy weather. Medicines hardly exist."

It was courting the death sentence to reveal publicly even this much. There was never any public exposure of the medieval torture chambers in which thousands of patriotic Vietnamese like Tran Thi Nham were tortured daily to the point of death.

Among the refugees I met on the 17th parallel was Tran Tham Liem, a gentle-faced young man, with a shock of black upswept hair who looked more like a poet than the fisherman he was. He came from Gia Linh coastal district not far south of the demarcation line.

"Our difficulty was," he said, "that to make sure we had no contact with fishermen from the North, we were not allowed to put to sea before 5 a.m. and had to be back by 6 p.m. To get any fish, you need to be at the fishing grounds before dawn which means putting out around midnight. With the new rules the fish were gone before you got there. But still we had to obey. In my hamlet there are 800 people. There are no rice fields — only the sea. With the crazy fishing rules we were at near starvation point all the time. Quite a few entered the agricultural colonies in despair. Others got converted to Catholicism, because you got a new suit, some American condensed milk, and maize flour. Just one single handout. But starving people took it.

"During one period the sea was rough for a whole month. Conditions were bad for fishing — but we went out just the same. We had to live. One day, because of rough seas a few of us just couldn't make it back before dark. We were taken to the chief of the village, who beat each of us severely with a bamboo cane. We went straight to the chief of the commune and told him why we had been late. We protested at the beating. He accused us of 'having ideas' and arrested us. We were taken off to Quang Tri prison. That was in the autumn of 1957. I have been there until a few weeks ago. I met others from our commune who had been there since 1954."

I asked about prison conditions.

"The first thing at Quang Tri prison is the 'official welcome', thirty strokes of a heavy bamboo baton, as thick as your wrist. You squat down on the floor, bent over with your head almost touching the floor while a strong brute bashes you. Several alongside me dropped down unconscious from pain or because of their heads knocking against the floor. They were dragged off by legs and arms and literally hurled into the cells. Where we were, the cells were for solitary confinement. But they packed five or six in each. The 'bed' was a concrete ledge about the size of a coffin. We were so crammed in we had to squat all day; only at roll-call could we stand up. We tried to get our faces near the

window then, to get a bit of air. We tried to arrange so that each would have his turn to get his face near the window at roll-call. Every day there was at least one death in the prison.

"Each meal we got a bowl of rice about the size of two match boxes with some grilled salt. For the slightest imagined offense — beatings with the bamboo batons. The most frequent illness was local or general paralysis. Sometimes we had to go to work; the less paralyzed would make special efforts to compensate for the others. But all the time the guards were there: 'Hurry up or you'll get beaten.' While we were at work, we would try and find a frog or a mouse. If you did, you just swallowed it on the spot — otherwise it was taken from you and you were beaten up.

"Once, three women found a mouse in their cell. They managed to make a tiny fire to grill it. One of them fainted with the smoke and the guards heard the noise as the others tried to revive her. The two others were dragged out and beaten to the verge of death.

"There was a pretense of a good coffin for those who died. But we found out it was the same one used over and over again. It had a false bottom and in fact corpses were wrapped in matting and buried without a coffin, just on the rough plank of the false bottom. [A trick used by the Kuomintang in burying their dead troops. To be buried without a good, solid coffin is traditionally considered a worse catastrophe than death itself in China and Vietnam.]

"Prisoners from other cells must never look at each other or at the guards. To raise your eyes was sufficient cause to be beaten. Those from 19 years upwards had regular medical checks for military services. You weren't actually recruited in the prison itself, but the moment you stepped out of its gates.

"Occasionally a dog was provided as a special treat. All the best parts went to the prison director and guard. Boiled bones and fat were set out on a plate divided among six prisoners. Before eating it, you had to shout: 'Long live President Ngo Dinh Diem. Down with the Viet Cong.' If you didn't shout loudly enough, there was the bamboo baton.

"For over four years, I was locked up in Quang Tri prison without ever having been accused, tried or sentenced. Every now and again I was taken out and beaten till I fainted. If I would sign a document to say I had stayed late at sea for a rendezvous with boats from the North then the beatings would stop, I was told. Then I would be released. But this was madness. I had been late because the wind and the waves made me late. I kept explaining this. One day the guards came and led me out, I thought maybe to be executed. But no, I was free. No explanations were given, I could go home. I was very weak, could hardly stand. I made my way back to my village, and friends helped me recover my health."

An atrocity story for propaganda? I could not believe this. The prison pallor was still fresh on his sensitive face. His phrases tumbled out terse and simple under my

questioning. After a quarter of a century of interviewing people in many lands, one learns to differentiate between the pure and the spurious in matters of truth. His story also fitted in only too well with other accounts I had heard in other places bordering South Vietnam, a thousand miles distant. He represented for me the living flesh and blood on the very official skeleton of prison life as presented by deputy Tran Ngoc Ban. His was just another confirmatory variant of the story of Tran Thi Nham.[7]

[7] It is pure coincidence that the three persons quoted on South Vietnam prison conditions and torture methods happen to be of the Tran family. This is one of the commonest family names after that of Nguyen in Vietnam. I have selected those interviews and statements which seemed the most authentic and significant, out of scores of others.

CHAPTER III: WAR AGAINST TREES

The State Department's "Blue Book"

To prepare public opinion for direct U.S. intervention in South Vietnam and to put pressure on other Western governments to join in, or at least give their blessing to foreign intervention, the U.S. government released a "Blue Book," entitled *A Threat to Peace — North Vietnam's Effort to Conquer South Vietnam.*[8] It was offered to the world by Secretary of State Dean Rusk at a special White House press conference on December 8, 1961. As a diplomatic document it must rank among the most primitive of its kind and it must be taken as a sign of the times that the State Department would lend its name to such a spurious effort.

There was nothing subtle in the explanation as to why it was published. It was to cover up U.S. intervention and to put pressure on the International Control Commission to adopt a report based on the book. Asked how the United States intended to justify open violation of the Geneva Agreement, Dean Rusk replied: "It is no violation of an agreement to protect oneself against the other party's breach." Three days later U.S. "anti-violation violations" in South Vietnam reached a new phase with the landing of the first U.S. combat units in Saigon.

The book itself seems to have been knocked together by psychological warfare experts and the sort of soap-advertisement publicists that the White House uses for such occasions. It may appear convincing to the usual targets of these experts but to anyone who knows anything about Vietnam it is a clumsy hotch-potch of half-lies, forgeries, and false deductions. An Introduction states that the report "relies on documentary and physical evidence and on the confessions of many captured Viet Cong personnel." As additional proof of the objectivity and authenticity of the work, the reader is informed: "Officials of the Government of the Republic of Vietnam gave unselfishly of their time and their expert advice." (P. 2.)

The case of Tran Thi Nham and scores of other victims of the Diemist torture squads, confirmed by ICC investigations, are sufficient commentary on the value of "confessions of captured Viet Cong personnel." In every case of scores which I personally investigated, the aim of torture was to get a signature on a typed document, similar to those presented in the "Blue Book" appendix. In most of them, as with Tran Thi Nham, the purpose was to produce a confession that the victim had been "planted" in the village as an agent from the North. The amount of blood spilt in trying to compile enough confessions to lend credibility to the "Blue Book" must have been fabulous.

[8] U.S. State Department, Far Eastern Series, No. 110, December 1961, Washington, D.C.

When I visited the 17th parallel, fishermen from the north bank of the Ben Hai complained about one of their boats with a crew of six aboard which had been seized by a Diemist patrol, on June 5, 1961. It had been with the others at a fishing ground off the Ben Hai estuary when a patrol vessel hove to alongside, Diemist agents boarded the little junk, and then towed it off. The fishermen learned later that two of the crew members had been tortured to death, the rest were in Tourane prison. The crews of several other boats washed ashore a few hundred yards south of the demarcation line during a typhoon a short time later were also imprisoned.

In the "Blue Book" much is made of the "An Don" case — the first one cited to prove "infiltration of agents." On June 5, 1961, as a Diemist patrol boat "approached a junk, one of the inspectors saw a familiar face. The inspector knew the young man's mother and knew that he had been missing for some time. Under questioning, the young man, Truong Van Hao, confessed. He and his four companions were taken into custody. It was an important arrest." (P. 25.) "Confessions" are then cited to the effect that the fishermen were really engaged in transporting agents to the South. It is certainly the same case related to me by the Ben Hai fishermen, despite the discrepancy of numbers aboard. Diem's torture squads transformed simple fishermen into "trained agents" after an act of sheer piracy.

Documents of "confessions" published in the appendix would be thrown out of any court of law. They are all long, typed statements with a photograph of the person concerned in one corner and a signature or thumb mark at the bottom. Names and terms are twisted around in the "Blue Book" to back up the main thesis on which intervention is based — namely that Vietnamese are foreigners in their own country and Americans from 10,000 miles away are the real masters of the land. Thus the Front of National Liberation, which was formed in South Vietnam after the November 1960 officers' coup, becomes "Front for Liberation of the South" in the "Blue Book" (p. 10) with the inference that it is an organization formed in the North to liberate the South. There is frequent reference to a "Committee for Supervision of the South" (pp. 18-19) with its headquarters in Hanoi. There is no such committee, but by the persons named as heading it, it becomes clear that for psychological warfare purposes the State Department has invented its own name for the "Committee for National Reunification" set up in Hanoi immediately after the ceasefire to watch over the correct implementation of the Geneva Agreement. Various officers are named as having been sent to the South to head "subversive" armed groups there. I checked on several of these and in most cases found they were no longer in the army. One was running a state farm; another was in the State Planning Commission; another had become a war historian. But the State Department has them located in the South.

This attempt to whitewash in advance U.S. intervention in Vietnam falls to pieces completely when it gets on to political ground:

> It was the Communists' calculation that nation-wide elections scheduled in the Accords [1954 Geneva Agreement] for 1956, would turn all of Viet-Nam over to them. With total control over the more populous North in their hands, the Communists assumed they would be able to promote enough support in the South for their cause to win in any balloting. The primary focus of the Communists' activity during the post-Geneva period was on political action — promoting discontent with the Government in Saigon and seeking to win supporters for Hanoi.
>
> The authorities in South Vietnam refused to fall into this well-laid trap. (P. 3.)

The State Department did not deem it necessary to explain that the "well-laid trap" was prepared by the closest allies of the United States. It was contained in an important international document drawn up after three months of negotiations and to which all the great powers — except the United States — affixed their signatures. A document known to the world as the 1954 Geneva Ceasefire Agreements on Indo-China, a key provision of which was that there would be general elections held by July 1956 to unify the country. Although the U.S. government refused to sign the agreements, it gave a pledge to respect them.

The Diem authorities, continues the "Blue Book," were convinced that "under the circumstances there could be no such thing as a completely free and democratic expression of opinion in the North. There was no satisfactory provision for effective general and impartial supervision of the proposed balloting. There was no assurance that the people would have a chance to hear any free discussion of the issues at stake." (P. 3.) As a bit of hypocritical double-talk, this is hard to beat. The sort of provisions the State Department was talking about were laid down in the Agreements. Details were to be arranged in preliminary discussions between the two sides, one year before the elections. First the French, then the Diem regime, refused to take part in these discussions. The ICC tried many times to bring the two sides together. North Vietnam pushed hard to get such talks started. The government in Hanoi had no reason to fear either free discussion or impartial supervision, but Diem and the State Department did.

"Moreover," continues this extraordinary document, "the Government in the South had never signed the Geneva Accords and was not bound by their provisions." (P. 3-4.) The authors seem to believe the old adage of "one law for the rich and another for the poor" can be carried into international diplomacy, because they go on to state that the "Blue Book" is partially based on reports published by the Diem government (July 1959, July 1960, and May 1961) which list alleged "violations" of the Geneva Agreements by the Communists. The Diem regime in other words can violate the Geneva Agreements at will and is in no way bound by them, but the world must go to war for alleged violations of these Agreements by the North. A very strange logic that might be acceptable to the CIA but is rejected by all normal people. The whole purpose of the book is to prove violations of an agreement to which the authors and their proteges say they are not

bound. In any case, up to the time the "Blue Book" was published, no violations had been registered by the ICC against the North while scores had been chalked up against the South.

In case State Department officials were in any doubt as to the real feelings of the Vietnamese, they could have been guided by the choice of those living in New Caledonia and Thailand. From the time of the ceasefire agreements, about 90,000 Vietnamese in Thailand and 6,000 in New Caledonia had been demanding to return home. In Thailand, the government of which is Diem's closest friend in Asia, they were subject to constant propaganda and other pressures from the Thai government and Diem embassy officials to return to South Vietnam. Eventually a plebiscite was held and 98 percent voted to go to North Vietnam, two percent to the South. By mid-1962 about 40,000 had returned to the North and not a single family to the South. In New Caledonia, Catholic priests and Diem agents also did their best. But plebiscite results showed five percent wanted to stay, two percent to go to the South, and 93 percent to the North. This is the attitude Diem and the U.S. government really feared inside the country — not any lack of "free discussion or impartial supervision" in the North.

What is clear is that had the U.S. government and the Diem regime permitted the 1955 discussions, election conditions could have been agreed on to satisfy the most scrupulous Western definition of "genuinely free and democratic" balloting. And what is equally clear is that had the elections themselves taken place there would be no such situation as now exists in South Vietnam. The whole country would have settled down to peaceful reconstruction, to the same peace and stability that now reigns in North Vietnam. The "threat to peace" arose specifically from U.S.-inspired frustration of the vital clauses of the Geneva Agreements, and the American-imposed dictatorship in Saigon.

An Indian diplomat from the ICC put it to me this way: "I have not delved much into internal affairs here, but I do see that in Hanoi, President Ho Chi Minh walks around everywhere without even a bodyguard as far as I can tell, while even a vice-minister of the Diem government coming to our National Day reception this year (1962) was escorted by eight jeep-loads of police and two armored cars."

The main burden of the "Blue Book" argument is that, having been frustrated in their hopes for reunification by peaceful means, Vietnam "Communists" have gone over to armed action, with troops and arms pouring from the North, although it admits that "the weapons of the Viet Cong are largely French or U.S.-made or hand-made on primitive forges in the jungles." The total strength of the "Viet Cong" "elite fighting forces" is given as "8,000 or 9,000 organized in some 30 battalions. An additional 8,000 or more troops operate under the leadership of regular Viet Cong officers at provincial or district level." (P. 10.) It is against these 16,000 or 17,000 that 300,000 Diemist troops and police, 7,000 U.S. "advisers," and U.S tanks, planes and warships were ranged in mid-1962. And

this was only the beginning of foreign intervention. The State Department was calling for much more.

Ending on a slightly hysterical note for a government document, the "Blue Book" appeals to:

> other friendly countries. ... to work out cooperatively the kind of assistance program likely to prove most effective. ... A government or a people who now think that "Vietnam is so far away from us" may well discover that they are the South Vietnamese of tomorrow. Then they may wish they had done more now. But then it will be late, very late, perhaps too late! (P. 53.)

And with that final burst of eloquence, the State Department closed its case and got down to the business of helping Diem kill his own people more efficiently.

Participation by the United States in killing Vietnamese has a long history. In 1950-51, U.S. dollars paid 15 percent of the cost of France's "dirty war" in Indo-China. In 1952 this rose to 35 percent; in 1953 to 45 percent and in 1954 — until the defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu put an end to it — the United States was putting up 80 percent of the cost. John Foster Dulles did not want Dien Bien Phu to put an end to it. In fact he fought most vigorously — as Anthony Eden reveals in his memoirs[9] — to keep the "dirty war" going by still dirtier methods. Dulles used the Geneva Conference and the period immediately preceding it to try and transform the Indo-China war into an international war on the Korean pattern. During the first days of the Geneva Conference, he took advantage of the presence of foreign ministers of countries which had taken part in the Korean war to sound them out on how many battalions each country was prepared to contribute to help the French. As an earnest of U.S. intentions, a U.S. task force, including an aircraft carrier with nuclear weapons aboard, was despatched to the Baie d'Along off the north coast of Vietnam. Only two countries responded to Dulles' demands at that time, Australia and South Korea. But after Korea, the United States did not want to go it alone in Indo-China.

One might be inclined to write that off as history were it not for the fact that what the late John Foster Dulles failed to bring off in 1954, President John Kennedy brought off in 1962 — direct U.S. participation in a war against the South Vietnamese people. [10]

---

[9] Full Circle: The Memoirs of Anthony Eden, Boston, 1960.

[10] As a young senator from Massachusetts, Kennedy attacked Eisenhower and Dulles at that time for concealing the truth about the Indo-China war from the American people. On April 6, 1954, in a speech in the U.S. Senate, he said: "To pour money, material and men into the jungles of Indo-China without at least a remote prospect of victory would be dangerously futile and destructive... I am frankly of the belief that no amount of American assistance in Indo-China can conquer an enemy which is everywhere, and at the same time nowhere; an 'enemy of the people' which has the sympathy and support of the people... For the United States to intervene unilaterally and to send troops into the most difficult terrain of the world... would mean that we would face a situation which would be more difficult than even that which we encountered in Korea.

The thousand-odd police dogs, being trained outside Saigon in mid-1962 to get used to the smell of Vietnamese flesh — part of the U.S. "Aid" program; the chemicals being sprayed to destroy crops and trees; American eyes on the bomb sights that send napalm to destroy Vietnamese homes and roast the peasant occupants — all this is the development of a process that started a dozen years previously when the U.S. government decided to back France against the Vietnamese people. No "Blue Book" is necessary to prove this. The South Vietnamese people have been on the receiving end of American bullets and bombs almost ever since the end of World War II.

One of the questions in many minds (especially those who have followed events in Asia like the routing of Chiang Kai-shek, the defeat of the French in Indo-China, and the outcome of the Korean war) is how the U.S. government envisages this new intervention ending. This was a question I put to the Cambodian Chief of State, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, a leader experienced in Asian affairs and with a specially sharp eye on what is going on across his own frontiers in South Vietnam.

"The deliberate intervention of U.S. forces alongside those of the Saigon dictatorship," he replied, "is not only dangerous but unrealistic. It is an action that has not the slightest chance of rallying any public support...

"What do they expect to gain? Think of the forces the French employed there. And what was the result? The French knew the country intimately, had certain roots there after 80 years, and despite all their armed strength and knowledge of the country, they were defeated in the end. What do the Americans think they can do? They can massacre the population. They can destroy the villages and cause terrible suffering. They can ruin the forests. Yes, monsieur," he said with his customary vigor: "They even make war against the trees now." He went on to repeat the dangers and hopelessness of American intervention and expressed the view that the best solution was a conference aimed at securing the neutralization of South Vietnam.

The Chemical Spray Campaign

The expression "war against trees" was one that stuck in my mind and in subsequent interviews with refugees and other travellers from South Vietnam, I paid special attention to this. The picture that emerged is horrifying. Wide-scale spraying of chemical agents from planes has been used not only against trees but against food crops with the deliberate intent of starving the peasantry into entering the "prosperity zones" and "strategic villages." Food-killers have been sprayed on areas outside the concentration zones to destroy all surrounding vegetation and further back still to destroy all crops and orchards apart from those grown behind barbed wire.

The South Vietnamese people have now become guinea pigs for testing out new types of weapons, types developed by the U.S. government for the sort of "local wars" which

Pentagon ideologists like Henry Kissinger had been urging on Washington for years previously.

From experimental tests on plots of about 10 acres carried out in August 1961, chemical spraying was begun early in 1962 over areas of several hundred acres at a time. Apart from the insane attempt to destroy a mile-wide strip of trees along South Vietnam's borders with Laos and Cambodia, air-sprayed chemicals have been used to clear swaths alongside roads and rivers, to create buffer zones around the "strategic villages," to clear the jungle from the *Hants Plateaux* region — the highlands home of many of the ethnic minorities. From the 17th parallel demarcation line down to the southernmost tip of South Vietnam, chemical warfare has been waged against forests, plantations, orchards, and food crops.

An account, typical of dozens of others I heard, was that given by Pham Tri Thach, a fragile, middle-aged peasant woman from Phuoc Tan village in Bien Hoa province. I met her at the 17th parallel, shortly after she had floated across the Ben Hai river at night, clinging to the stout trunk of a banana palm. She had made her way across from one of the southernmost provinces, hitching rides where she could on trucks and boats, but for hundreds of miles she had slogged it out on foot till she reached the Ben Hai.

"Planes came over on several mornings between January 12 and 18," she said. "Not only over our village but the nearby ones of Tarn Phuoc, An Loi, and Tarn An. I saw them the first time on the 12th. I was on my way to market when a plane came down quite low with what looked like whitish smoke coming out of its tail. There was another one about the same height half a kilometre away. When the 'smoke' drifted over me, I thought at first I was going to choke. My chest started to burn. All the way to market I had difficulty in breathing. I had to keep stopping to sit down. After a while my nose started bleeding. When I got to the market I found some other women suffered the same thing. Two of them were bleeding from the mouth as well. Others had burning pains in the chest.

"Everyone talked about it at the market. We thought it must be some new thing to kill insects. But afterwards, on the way home I noticed all the young rice plants had shrivelled up. Leaves on the banana palms were hanging limply alongside the trunks. There was something peculiar about the leaves on papaya and other trees.

"When I got back to the village, I found that one of my neighbors, a woman of my age, was paralyzed. She had also had severe nose bleeding and vomiting. She was paralyzed for several hours. By evening she was able to move about alright, but had severe pains in the chest and difficulty in breathing. She had been hoeing in the fields and started to run when the plane came right over her head. She and others who were in the fields said the plants shrivelled up five minutes after they had been sprayed.

"Next day the banana palms were dead and the leaves had fallen from all the fruit trees. They died afterwards too. From the other villages we heard that several other people had been temporarily paralyzed and many others had chest pains."

A wizened up old fisherman, with a face like a ripe walnut — one of a group which had fled north in a flimsy raft-like boat of lashed bamboo poles — told of how planes at the end of the previous December had sprayed a ten-mile stretch of coastal land.

"Two planes came," he said, "and sprayed up and down just as if they were ploughing a field. We were fishing just off the coast and wondered what they were up to. By the time we got ashore, the banana palms were dead and the leaves of other fruit trees were hanging limp. The folk ashore were complaining of pains in the chest. Afterwards the leaves dropped off all the trees. Some of them died but on others the leaves grew back again. The worst affected were the fruit trees, bananas, papaya, mandarins, and others. They all died."

The worst report came from two villages, along strategic Route 15, which leads from Saigon north to the 17th parallel. On January 14 and 15, planes systematically sprayed rice fields, plantations, and orchards. The result, according to a former minor functionary of the Diem administration now an exile in Cambodia, was the destruction of 230 acres of rubber trees — two whole plantations — 50 acres of citrus trees, 190 acres of other fruit trees, 35 acres of coffee, 287 acres of rice fields, and 87 acres of vegetable gardens.

"Thousands of days of work and many years of growth destroyed in two days by American planes," said the former functionary who must be nameless as his family remains in South Vietnam. "The official reason was that vegetation must be destroyed to protect the road from Viet Cong attacks, to deny them a hiding place. But the real reason was to destroy the people's livelihood so they would be forced to abandon the villages near the road and move back into the so-called 'prosperity zone'."

A similar action to clear a half-mile wide strip each side of the road between Saigon and Cap St. Jacques, resulted in the destruction of several hundred acres of mainly French-owned rubber plantations. The French and Vietnamese plantation owners in this case created a big scandal, demanding heavy compensation, and the "war against trees" was halted for a time — at least in that area. But according to reliable reports the Americans have stocked sufficient chemicals to spray an area 1,500 miles long by six miles wide. Normal procedure is to photograph the target area from helicopters before and after spraying, presumably to verify the results.

The chemicals used against vegetation are only one of a number of new types of warfare the Americans are trying out — Asians as usual on the receiving end.

As to what is being used — and prepared for future use — there was a revealing article in *Newsweek* of August 21, 1961. Among the new weapons and equipment being shipped to, or designed for Southeast Asia, writes *Newsweek*, are:

> A "microjet" rocket, a tiny projectile about an inch long, that can be fired from a plastic tube no bigger than a drinking straw. The needlelike nylon rocket has a range of 4,000 yards, a velocity of 4,000 feet per second. The weapon in effect is a modern

> adaptation of blow-gun darts, and by mounting a cluster of straws together, a Gatling gun effect can be created. "It's almost a silent killer and it's the deadliest little weapon I've ever seen," says a guerilla expert...
>
> An explosive gas that could be released over the enemy. Hugging the ground, the gas is set off by any spark in the same way that dust in a grain elevator ignites. "In a fraction of a second," say a researcher, "the stuff goes boom and it pulverizes everything in sight."
>
> Canadian made de Haviland "Caribou" transport planes that can be effectively used from improvised airfields for close support of troops. The Caribou carries 24 paratroopers or three tons of cargo at speeds up to 200 mph or as slow as 70 mph. Vietnam is getting some of the first off the assembly line.[11]

Among other types of chemicals that *Newsweek* did not mention is one sprayed from a plane or fired in artillery shells. A sort of gas hovers a few feet above the ground and ignites with explosive effect at a spark or grenade explosion. Another kind, sprayed in combat areas, lies like soap suds on the ground and explodes at a grenade burst or if a tracer bullet is fired into it. A variant of the anti-vegetation chemical is one which when sprayed on ponds or lakes kills the fish and ducks and other birds that feed on the fish.

From descriptions by eye-witnesses from many different parts of South Vietnam, the general effect of the anti-vegetation chemicals seems to be the following. Within a few hours of being sprayed, plants like rice and maize are completely dried up; root crops like sweet potatoes and manioc deteriorate markedly within 24 hours; quick-growing vegetation like banana palms and papaya trees die wthin 24 hours, the banana palm simply collapsing on the ground. Forest trees and some of the hardier fruit trees lose their leaves and bark after a few weeks, but unless the same trees are sprayed several times in succession, the leaves grow again. There seems to be a difference in the strength of the chemicals used, as some accounts spoke of leaves of rice plants shrivelling up within a matter of minutes, others in hours. Also some of those I spoke with thought the chemicals that killed the fish and ducks were the same as those used against vegetation.

On March 16, 1962, *Agence France Presse* (AFP) carried the following despatch from Saigon:

> The first American attempts to wipe out the thick vegetation along the main communication routes in South Vietnam by means of powerful chemical agents does not seem to have given the expected results. Two months after the beginning of these experiments, only the upper foliage of the forests have been "killed"; the leaves burned a brownish hue have still not fallen, while under the big trees, the

[11] The fact that Canada is a member of the International Control Commission, whose task it is to see that no war material enters the country, does not seem to have bothered the Newsweek reporter.

> jungle which offers a much-sought cover for the Viet Cong, remains as thick and vigorous as ever. Officially, one is merely told that the experts have not finished evaluating the results of the first attempts and that there is no reason to believe that the experiment has been conclusive.
>
> Further attempts will doubtless be made, it is added, when the experts' recommendations are known. The main aim of the operation, it is recalled, is to try and free the main communication routes and also, if possible, create a vast stretch of territory denuded of all vegetation along the frontier between South Vietnam and Laos.

AFP sets the beginning of the experiments about January 14 and 15, the time of the two attacks on the two districts mentioned earlier and made in a region difficult to conceal. With the extremely tight restrictions on Saigon correspondents, it is possible that the earlier experiments and the scale of the chemical warfare have been kept secret from them. It is not an operation that American military chiefs are very interested in publicizing. War against trees and food crops, and experiments in chemical warfare against Asian peoples are not the way to win friends anywhere in the world. Especially not in Asia where the overwhelming majority of the people live so close to the soil. The battle to fill the family rice bowl is too intense for any Vietnamese peasant to feel anything but raging fury towards those who perpetrate such acts. To wage war against nature as well as against the Vietnamese people adds macabre elements to U.S. intervention. Using Asians as victims for tests of new weapons fits into an all too-familiar pattern which stretches from Hiroshima to the nuclear weapons tests in the Pacific.

New Phase of U.S. Intervention

Chemical warfare is of course only one sidelight of U.S. military activities in South Vietnam. The new phase of direct involvement started with the visit of Vice-President Lyndon Johnson to Saigon in May 1961 with a letter from President Kennedy offering stepped-up U.S. aid. A communique issued on May 13, after three days of talks between Johnson and Diem, mentioned eight points, although press despatches said the program included 15 items. Some were kept secret. In the rather evangelical language of the communique, it was stated that both governments had agreed to step up existing military and economic aid programs "and to infuse into their joint actions a high sense of urgency and dedication." The United States would finance additional armed forces, and would provide "Military Assistance Program support for the entire Vietnamese Civil Guard forces." The two governments "should collaborate in the use of military specialists," and "the assistance of other Free Governments... against Communist guerilla forces would be welcome." More financial aid was of course promised and it was agreed

that both sides "would discuss new economic and social measures to be undertaken in rural areas, to accompany the anti-guerilla effort."

Other points not mentioned in the communique, but leaked to the press, included the despatch of U.S. "guerilla experts"; more "advisers" to train troops and police; U.S. engineers to repair guerilla-wrecked bridges and to build roads and airstrips; more cash to add another 20,000 men to Diem's army.

Following Johnson's visits, U.S. military experts started swarming on Saigon like vultures on a dead cow. By November 1961 there had been no less than 44 military missions visiting South Vietnam, expert in everything from 55 methods of silent killing to tightening the stays in bullet-proof vests. The two most important were those headed by Dr. Eugene Staley in July and by Kennedy's special military adviser, General Maxwell Taylor in October.

Staley himself is almost the personification of the central figure in Graham Greene's famous book, *The Quiet American*. A mousy sort of person, with trim grey moustache, an economist who likes to pass for a "liberal," he emerged on the South Vietnamese scene with missionary-like fervor to "save the country from communism." With clinical efficiency he set to work to draw up a plan of which a Hitler or an Eichmann would have been proud to have dreamed up. Details of this scheme so meticulously prepared by the "liberal" economics expert have not been announced officially, but the most monstrous provisions, which have little to do with either economics or liberalism, are well known.

Apart from calling for an intensified effort to form concentration camp villages, mentioned earlier, Staley's plan provided for:

(1) Pacification of South Vietnam within 18 months and intensified sabotage in North Vietnam by air-dropped spies and commando groups.

(2) Following pacification, to build up the army on a regular, modern basis, intensify sabotage in the North, and organize commando bases in the North for future action.

(3) Develop the economy of the South and attack the North.

To carry out the first stages, Staley recommended: (a) increasing the regular army from 150,000 to 270,000, the militia from 68,000 to 100,000, and gradually transform the militia into regular forces; increase the police from 45,000 to 90,000 and develop various local guard and militia units to free the police for mopping up and regular military operations, (b) to organize a network of "strategic villages" and "prosperity zones" with a series of "no man's lands" to isolate South Vietnam from her neighbors and the "prosperity zones" from each other; (c) to launch a series of military actions to destroy the resistance movement.

The plan was accepted, and to carry it out President Kennedy stepped up military allocations for South Vietnam for 1961 from the original $125,000,000 to $216,000,000 and for 1962, to $400,000,000. No peasants anywhere in the world had so many dollars per capita lavished on their extermination.

General Maxwell Taylor was sent from October 19 to 25, to work out supplementary details of the Staley Plan in view of a decision taken a few days earlier by the National Security Council (which directs military policy in Washington) on direct U.S. intervention. Taylor's proposals called for:

(1) Diem's army to be reorganized structurally and placed under direct U.S. control. The powers of lower echelons would be increased and units would obey the orders of American "advisers" of the MAAG (Military Aid and Assistance Group) without reference to Diem's own Headquarters staff.

(2) Small units of the U.S. army would gradually be transferred to Vietnam.

(3) The number of U.S. "advisers" would be increased. Deliveries of arms, including various new types would be stepped up to re-equip the Diem army.

(4) After the frontier between South Vietnam and Laos was sealed off with the "no man's land" as provided by Staley, troops would be stationed along the frontier and then a corridor would be established linking South Vietnam with Thailand through Laos. There would be a single command embracing Thailand, Laos, and South Vietnam; Cambodia would then be completely isolated and subject to increased pressures.

This program was approved by President Kennedy and the National Security Council on November 15. The "Blue Book" was hastily knocked together for release a few weeks later, and on December 11 the first U.S. combat units — still technically classed as "advisers" and "instructors" — arrived in Saigon.

During the latter part of November and early December, large quantities of war material, including helicopters and fighter-bombers, started arriving in South Vietnam, unannounced by Washington or Saigon but reported in the world press. The correspondent of the London Times, for instance, reported on December 8, that supplies delivered by the United States within the previous few weeks "range from fighter-bombers aircraft to trained dogs for hunting down terrorists." Four days later, the *New York Times* reported the arrival of two U.S. helicopter companies comprising "at least" 33 helicopters with 400 U.S. pilots and ground crew. These would be "assigned" to Diem's army but would remain under U.S. control and operation. American combat troops, from December 11, 1961, were thus directly involved in combat operations in an undeclared war against the South Vietnamese people.

From 2,000 U.S. "instructors" at the beginning of 1961, the number went up to 7,000 by mid-1962. Apart from training Diem's troops, U.S. military personnel work out operational plans, direct combat operations, fly the fighter and bomber planes that protect such operations, release the bombs and fire the machine-guns, transport Diem's troops by helicopter to carry out terror raids against recalcitrant villages, and hunt down guerillas with German police dogs. The latter had been requested by Diem after U.S. experts carried out a demonstration in which two dogs — the sort the Nazis used to force their victims to quicken their pace into the gas chambers — had discovered eight

"Viet Cong" in a refuge 30 miles northwest of Saigon. Robert Trumbull reported in the *New York Times* of December 6, that "high South Vietnamese government officials who witnessed the demonstrations" were so "highly impressed with this performance, the South Vietnamese government has asked the United States to provide 1000 dogs." One wonders what sort of training a dog has to receive to distinguish between a peasant and a "Viet Cong"! In fact these dogs are to be used as American slaveowners used bloodhounds in the past to track down their runaway slaves — to hound down any peasant who lives or moves outside the concentration camp villages.

Intervention was formalized on February 8, 1962, with the establishment of a U.S. Military Command in Saigon, headed by General Paul Donal Harkins — also an old Korean hand — Chief of Staff of the U.S. Army, Pacific area. Harkins set up a headquarters staff big enough to handle three combat divisions, according to the U.S. press.

All the moves preceding the setting up of the Command and much of its actual activities were shrouded in secrecy. What little was known of what was going on was pried out of tight-lipped Pentagon planners — including the President — by congressmen and journalists anxious to know if Kennedy was pushing the United States into another Korea.

Such anxiety was expressed in many U.S. periodicals. The *Christian Century* of April 25, 1962, for instance, accused President Kennedy of concealing the facts about South Vietnam just as Senator Kennedy accused President Eisenhower eight years previously:

> Give us the truth Mr. President [the Protestant weekly said in an editorial]... What justification has the President for sending U.S. troops, reported to number nearly 5,000, plus ships and planes to a country 10,000 miles away?
>
> According to the Geneva Convention of 1954, South Vietnam can have no more than 685 military advisers from a single nation and it is forbidden to import military personnel from any foreign country.

A nice question arose for Washington when the first Americans were wounded. The elaborate pretense that no Americans were engaged in combat had to be maintained. On the other hand, the wounded were demanding their Purple Heart medals. But these are awarded only to those wounded in action "against an armed enemy of the United States." The first sergeant to have been wounded in action was denied his medal, because as the *New York Times* reported on April 24, "Washington does not recognize this as a combat zone for Americans." The report went on to say that "Eight of twenty planes of the United States Light Helicopter Company have holes from Communist bullets. The crews cannot follow the subtlety of State Department thinking and are indignant." A few days later, Washington overcame its legal scruples and decided to award the medals. In the same quiet, furtive way in which the whole intervention

operation has been handled, the South Vietnamese people are now classified as *an armed enemy of the United States*.

Lest there be any doubt as to the direct U.S. participation in the furtive war, there was an interesting despatch from the *Agence France Presse* correspondent in Saigon, on March 16, 1962:

> American instructors sent to South Vietnam within the framework of U.S. military aid to this country sometimes take part in combat operations against the Viet Cong. According to the U.S. Embassy in Saigon, this does not at all imply that it is the United States that wages or directs the war in South Vietnam. Their role, as set out in official State Department directives to their U.S. Embassy in Saigon, is solely to provide material aid and logistics support to the Vietnamese armed forces, to train and advise them...
>
> However it is recognized unofficially that it is sometimes difficult actually to distinguish between "pure training" and "active participation" in combat operations. Training, it is stressed, is not always done on the training ground but sometimes also on the battlefield. Thus certain instructors may be led to advise a commando unit in actual combat. It is the same thing in the huge project for training pilots. It happens that planes leave on combat missions with an American pilot-instructor at the controls and a young Vietnamese pilot. In such a case the instructor has to carry out his task to advise, by showing in fact how to do it.

On the same day Reuter quoted U.S. Defense Secretary McNamara at a Washington press conference as saying that two-seater training planes have now replaced single-seaters in the Vietnamese Air Force. "Such training," said McNamara, "occasionally takes place in combat conditions." Asked whether American pilots actually use the machine-guns or drop bombs on Communist guerillas, McNamara is quoted as replying: "Americans have received instructions not to fire unless they are attacked." Pressed to say whether this applied to planes as well, the U.S. Defense Secretary said "yes," the firing to which he referred applied to planes as well as to forces on the ground.

In other words before the pilot strafed or napalmed a recalcitrant village, he should enter into the plane's log that he had been receiving "ground fire" — that is, if he really believed the scruples of McNamara or the Pentagon. To ensure better efficiency was not the only reason for U.S. pilots at the controls. As the AFP despatch pointed out, "the training results have not been at all bad if one judges by the accuracy with which the rebel pilots recently bombed the Presidential palace." But because Diem feared to let any Vietnamese pilot at the controls of a plane loaded with bombs and rockets, the twin-seater combat planes were introduced within a matter of weeks after the bombing of Diem's palace.

Another interesting sidelight on the cloak-and-dagger nature of U.S. intervention was the arrival in Saigon on April 15, 1962, of Allen Dulles, former chief of the Central

Intelligence Agency. He came as a member of a Pentagon "study" group to check up, among other things, according to the *New York Times*, as to whether "The approximately 6,000 U.S. military personnel... really know why they are here and what they are doing."

For a typical account of "what they are doing," Dulles could look up the *New York Times*. Under the headline, "US 'Copters Aid Attack on Red Force in Vietnam," he could gladden his heart and pride with the following despatch, date lined Cai Ngai, Vietnam, March 9,1962.

> United States Army helicopters carried a Vietnamese battalion in a successful raid today against this Communist stronghold near the southern tip of Vietnam. Five helicopters were struck by Communist bullets and one was disabled... [As for what sort of a "stronghold," the despatch continues] Cai Ngai, a clutter of huts along a canal 20 miles southwest of Ca Mau in An Xuyen province, fell easily after a brief fight. Three Communist guerillas were killed in a bamboo thicket at the edge of a village. Strafing by Vietnamese fighter planes killed an estimated 25 more who were seen to flee the encirclement. . .. About 20 suspected Viet Cong guerillas were seized.
>
> But as usual the main enemy force got away. It slipped through the trap even though the airborne attackers had achieved excellent surprise in their vertical envelopment of the village... The Government troops failed to exploit the Viet Cong state of shock. They bunched up and dawdled in drainage ditches and under the shade of coconut trees until an American adviser cried out in exasperation. "Let's move this thing forward!"

To anyone reading between the lines, an attack was made against an ordinary South Vietnamese village. Fleeing peasants were mown down by American piloted fighter-bombers. A few were killed and a few more seized. The South Vietnamese troops were reluctant to take part in further butchery but were prodded into action by an American officer. This is a scene repeated daily over large areas of Vietnam, especially in the Ca Mau peninsula where the most intense U.S.-Diem effort was made in the first half of 1962 to herd the peasants into concentration camp villages. One wonders whether the U.S. "advisers" have no qualms that the day might come when South Vietnamese troops will turn their guns on the foreign officers and make common cause with their intended victims. The French could probably give them a few tips about this. There are signs that this is already starting.

After an attempt had been made — allegedly by students — to assassinate U.S. Ambassador Frederick E. Nolting Jr., in Saigon and several Americans had been wounded by grenades in that city, Saigon has taken on more and more the face it wore at the height of the war against the French. The *New York Times* reported on May 21, that "buses for servicemen have wire screened windows to deflect missiles. Some restaurants have taken the precaution of installing wire netting across their front

windows. . . . The (U.S.) embassy is planning to renew next week its warning against travel outside Saigon." Just like old times, the French colonialists were saying.

In connection with the grenade thrown at the U.S. Ambassador, a brilliant poet and professor of mathematics, Le Quang Vinh, and three students were sentenced to death and eight other students sentenced to from five years to life imprisonment. The grenade incident was used as a pretext to terrorize Saigon students in particular and intellectuals in general. Students had been agitating for some time for the Vietnamese language to replace English and French as the sole languages for instruction in South Vietnam's higher educational establishments. Also they had been demanding that an effort be made to build more schools. In Saigon, highly favored in comparison with other centers, over half the children of school age had no education because there were neither schools to attend nor teachers to instruct. Le Quang Vinh, who had received his higher education in France and the United States, supported the students' demands, a sufficient cause for his arrest.

At his trial before a Saigon "special" court, on May 23, 1962, despite the standard severe tortures he had undergone, he used the court room to denounce in no uncertain terms the fascist nature of the Diem regime and the iniquities of foreign intervention. He and the other 11 accused all denied any knowledge of the assassination attempt.

It was obvious that the U.S. Ambassador only had to lift his little finger to spare the life of Le Quang Vinh and the others. The sentences were monstrous even had they been guilty of the incident, in which no one was injured. To expect humanitarian considerations to move the chief agent of U.S. intervention in South Vietnam, would be unrealistic but one would have thought that political considerations might have moved Ambassador Nolting. The savagery of this sentence united thousands more students and intellectuals against Diem and the Americans.

To emphasize that they had come to stay and to compensate for the privileges denied them by the guerillas of looking for fun outside Saigon, the Americans started to build picnic grounds with barbecue pits, bowling alleys, an "Olympic-sized" swimming pool, tennis courts, radio station, and the like. Trees being planted in 1962 were expected to shade American invasion troops in years to come, but they feel so insecure even in Saigon, despite the U.S. military patrols that prowl the streets of the capital day and night, that it was decided to set up special housing units for the garrison troops and other personnel of the fast-developing new colonialists. This, reported the *New York Times* on June 21, 1962, "would also ease the extraordinary difficulty of providing security for offices and men now scattered throughout Saigon in converted hotels and apartment blocks. The proposed units would form a compound more easily protected against grenade throwers."

Involvement of the Control Commission

A "threat to peace" there is indeed in South Vietnam, but not, as the "Blue Book" claims, because of any activities of, or from the North. The real threat comes from 10,000 miles away — in Washington's Pentagon building.

The Americans did manage however to pull something off with the "Blue Book." At the press conference at which Dean Rusk presented this dubious document, he said that he was confident that the International Control Commission would take up many of the matters raised in the book. President Kennedy, he said, had raised the question with Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru during the latter's visit to Washington the previous week. As the United States loudly proclaimed, it had never signed the Geneva Agreements, and indeed encouraged its puppets in Laos and South Vietnam to denounce them as often as possible. Accordingly, it was hardly Kennedy's place to discuss with anyone the work of the ICC (established only to control the application of the Geneva Agreements). Among other demands Kennedy had pressed at the meeting with Nehru was that India immediately send a "strong man" to Vietnam as Chairman of the Commission. Accordingly, Mr. Parthasarathy, whom Nehru had just named India's representative at the UN, was hastily despatched to Vietnam, on what must have been a disagreeable task.

The Americans were impatient. Their intervention had already started and despite the furtive way in which the start had been made, there were raised eyebrows in many capitals normally complacent about any U.S. moves. The *New York Times* of April 28, 1962, had reported that Washington was "putting pressure" on India to produce a report that would show evidence of subversion, sabotage, and terrorism on the part of North Vietnam.

> On the diplomatic front [reported Washington correspondent Max Frankel] the United States is still trying to prod the Indian member of the three-nation International Control Commission to denounce North Vietnamese "subversion" and "interference" in South Vietnam. This, it is believed, would be the best way of combating Communist contentions that the fighting amounts to a civil war between a "reactionary" government and national "liberators." Officials cited this policy to rebut reports that President Ngo Dinh Diem was considering the idea of evicting the commission as ineffective and as a cover-up for Communist activities.

Fake a report or get out, the Americans were telling the Control Commission just as Diem later told U.S. correspondents, "Produce paper victories, or get out."

Even if "subversion" and "interference" were at the root of the problem, which they were certainly not, these terms are nowhere mentioned in the Geneva Agreements, the implementation of which the International Commission was in Vietnam to control. But clauses specifically mentioned in the Agreements were being violated day in and day out by the United States itself and by the Diem regime.

Nevertheless, to the discredit of those responsible for its compilation, a majority report, with Poland strenuously objecting, was produced which dutifully rubber-stamped many of the charges made in the "Blue Book." As an example of the quality of the ICC majority report, it is stated that it has been impossible to check the "accuracy" of reports of "alleged" American military aid. The Americans had quite officially spoken of 5,000 "advisers" and the U.S. press by the time the report was published had put the figure at 7,000. But the ICC report, in an outrageous attempt to diminish the importance of U.S. intervention, said its teams from December 3, 1961, to May 5, 1962, had "controlled the entry of 72 military personnel and observed but not controlled, 173 personnel," plus military planes, howitzers, armored cars, etc.

The prestige of the ICC could not but suffer in producing a document so obviously aimed at justifying America's undeclared war against the people of South Vietnam.

CHAPTER IV: PERSONALISM AND PERSONALITIES

Bombing of Diem's Palace

Early in the morning of February 27, 1962, a single-engined American AD-6 Skyraider fighter made an unannounced and spectacular belly-landing at Cambodia's Phnom Penh airport. Hardly had the dust from the propeller's contact with the tarmac cleared away when a jeep with three uniformed Americans appeared. They grabbed the slightly dazed Vietnamese pilot as he eased himself out of the cockpit, removed his pistol and communication's code. They were about to hustle him into the jeep, probably for transfer to an American plane which was warming up its engines further down the airstrip, when another jeep, laden with indignant Cambodian police appeared. After all, its was a Cambodian airport and the United States has no extra-territorial rights in *Cambodia!* After some heated exchanges the Cambodians left with the young Vietnamese.

An hour previously, pilot Nguyen Van Cu had been dive-bombing the Presidential palace of dictator Ngo Dinh Diem. His plane bore the white star of the U.S. Air Force, plus three yellow stripes for South Vietnam. Near the tail was a big red devil with a pitchfork — doubtless a symbol of Diem's hopes of consigning all his enemies to the infernal regions.

When I landed at Phnom Penh airport a few weeks later, the plane with its propeller twisted up at the ends had been parked alongside another white-starred U.S. Dakota transport plane which 18 months earlier had also made an unannounced landing at Phnom Penh. It had aboard a group of officers who had staged a military coup against Diem which had come within an ace of success.

Pilot Nguyen Van Cu, brave as a lion, had hit his target but missed his man. So great was Diem's confidence in his own Air Force that he fled for his air-raid shelter at the mere sound of an approaching plane. His sister-in-law, Madame Nhu, could not wait for Diem to get down the stairs. She cleared them in one jump from the first to ground floor and hurt her arm, the only family casualty.

"The only thing I regret," said Nguyen Van Cu, "is that I didn't release my bombs with the first dive. I wanted to be absolutely sure of my target and as it was slightly cloudy, I made one 'free' run to line up my primary target. On the second dive I dropped a bomb straight into Diem's apartment. It didn't explode. Only on the three successive dives did everything go off all right. But by that time the devil was in his hide-out."

Saigon radio had said that the two pilots — a second one had been shot down and captured — were "Viet Cong." Was this correct?

"No," replied Nguyen Van Cu. "I am not a Communist at all. But I am an ardent nationalist. I object most strongly to what is being done to my country. I detest the Diem dictatorship." He was reluctant to reveal the full implications of his attack but made it fairly clear that Diem's death was to have been the signal for further, more important action. He revealed that the anti-aircraft guns from Diem's palace were the only ones that fired at the planes. "The rest just fired up in the air," he said. "And the fighters sent up to shoot me down never made much effort. After all, my plane was limping badly, nearly crippled with ack-ack bursts." He also said he had circled for some time after the attack, hoping for a message agreed previously that would tell him where to land at a "friendly" field in South Vietnam. The message never arrived.

In the palace at the time were three of the Ngo brothers as well as Madame Nhu — Diem himself, *Ngo Dinh Nhu* and *Ngo Dinh Thuc*. In a despatch to the *New York Times* the following day, Homer Bigart reported from Saigon as the reason for the attack that the two brothers — Nhu and Thuc — had been accused of "helping the President operate a family dictatorship over the country." Bigart went on to note that the two pilots were believed to have been "thoroughly loyal" to the regime. "They belonged to the most westernized of Vietnam's military services. They had been trained by American military advisers in the techniques of dropping napalm, or jellied gasoline and other explosives on guerilla-occupied villages and other points of Communist concentrations." The correspondent also revealed that Diem's spokesmen denied that napalm had been dropped, in order to conceal the fact that it is being used on a large scale to wipe out Vietnamese villages. "There is some sensitivity here on the subject of napalm which was used against Vietnam by the French."

Another "chilling" fact noted by Saigon correspondents was that Pham Phu Quoc, the downed-pilot who led the attack, was not some "irresponsible youth" as Diem's official spokesmen described him, but a squadron operations officer and one of the best pilots in the South Vietnam Air Force. For days after the attack all planes were grounded. The main air base at Bien Hoa was surrounded by tanks while a great "loyalty check" or purge went on among the pilots. From that time on, it was reported, the only "South Vietnamese" planes that could carry bombs or rockets were those piloted by U.S. "instructors."

At a demonstrative public appearance staged by Diem in Saigon a few days later, the *New York Times* (March 5, 1962) reported, "Ordinary citizens, who were not allowed within a block of the Presidential stand, gave Mr. Ngo Dinh Diem a mild cheer when he drove past with a heavy military escort." As the Western world is being invited with ever-increasing urgency by the U.S. government to internationalize the fight to preserve "freedom" — in the form of the Diem regime — in South Vietnam, a closer glance at the reasons why people have to be kept a blocks-length from their President, why the latter

is the object of attacks from those considered "most loyal" and "most Westernized," is not out of place.

The Officers' Coup

It is not easy to have accurate information as to just what the regime is and how it works. The Americans, who are the best-informed outsiders — their chief military, security, and political advisers breakfast daily with Diem and the Nhu couple — are the least interested in revealing what really goes on. Any Vietnamese close enough to the regime to be well informed and imprudent enough to reveal what he knows, quickly finds himself behind iron bars, or often enough without his head. Some rare facts however were brought out of the country by some of the officers who staged the coup of November 11, 1960, and who now live in exile in Cambodia. Different officers had different motives for making the coup, ranging from those who wanted to prosecute the war against the "Viet Cong" more efficiently to those who wanted to stop the war and set up a neutral government. The thing that united them was their hatred and contempt for the Diem regime. The coup failed because those who carried it out had no clear line. They made no appeal for popular support. They believed in the "sincerity" of American mediation attempts, which prevented them from using the 48 hours in which they had control of Saigon to act in a decisive way to seize complete power. Instead they gave Diem and the U.S. advisers time to bring units loyal to Diem to the city. As with the pilots, the air-borne unit which carried out the coup was one of the most "Westernized," more properly "Americanized," in the Diem army.

I have a memorandum from some of those who took part in the coup and then fled to Cambodia. They include Nguyen Van Loc, ex-battalion commander and chief of staff of Diem's elite Air-Borne Brigade; Phan Lac Tuyen, vice-commander of the Saigon garrison Commando troops and editor of Diem's weekly military review *Sink Luc*; Tran Trong Nghia, ex-commander of the 5th Marine Commando group. This is a revealing document from officers in key positions to know what was going on.

They speak, for instance, of the "Three D" principle on which all appointments of any consequence had to be based. "All provincial and district chiefs, regimental, battalion or company, commanders, etc.," were chosen from those who completely met the "Three D requirements." These were Dang for political party, Dao for religion, and Dia Phuong for region of origin. As further spelled out, it meant one had to be a member of one of the two political parties formed by the Ngo brothers: the "Can Lao Nhan Vi" (Labor and Personalism) party formed by Nhu, or the "Phong Trao Cach Mang Quec Gia" (National Revolutionary Movement) founded by Diem. As for "Dao," the requirement was that one must be of Diem's Catholic religious faith. "Dia Phuong" meant that one had to come

from Central Vietnam, place of origin of the Diem family. As for the two political parties, the statement says, these are:

> organs for recruiting those faithful to the Diem family. *Ngo Dinh Nhu* was the "Fuhrer" of these two political clubs, the members of which were simply spies. A great number of officials and officers were dismissed or simply liquidated on the basis of reports made by their colleagues, members of these two parties....
>
> Under the dictatorial, oligarchic regime of Ngo Dinh Diem, morality, behavior, professional capacity, knowledge and educational standards have become useless and superfluous as regards official appointments or any appreciation of the value of officials and officers.

The statement goes on to summarize some characteristics of the Diem family — presenting facts which are well enough known in Saigon, and can be amplified.

> The political history of Diem is that of a zero. Under the French Protectorate, during those long years when our compatriots waged a bitter struggle to smash the yoke of French colonialism, Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Ngo Dinh Khoi (condemned to death by a revolutionary tribunal in 1945) drenched their hands in the blood of the patriotic population. His deeds of those days are recorded for history.
>
> Since he was put into power by outside forces after the 1954 Geneva Agreements, Ngo Dinh Diem aided by his family sought only to consolidate his dictatorial and oligarchic regime, to enrich himself and satisfy the economic, political, and financial whims of Madame *Ngo Dinh Nhu*.
>
> All the brothers of Diem have been entrusted with important key posts. *Ngo Dinh Nhu*, nominated Diem's political adviser, is the uncontested real political master of South Vietnam, at the same time the head of the two Diemist political clubs. He has been dubbed the *eminence grise* because of his insatiable ambition to be a "leader." Ngo Dinh Can, also political adviser, is the "viceroy" of Central Vietnam, where he is notorious for his dictatorship and his taste for blood. Non-Diemist officials, officers, and political leaders have been liquidated and imprisoned purely and simply on his personal orders. Ngo Dinh Luyen, Ambassador to London, is the most obscure of the brothers. Bishop *Ngo Dinh Thuc* has profited from and abused his religious functions by also playing politics in order to consolidate the dictatorial powers of his brother. No one has forgotten the crude blunder Diem committed in his relations with the Vatican by putting political pressure on South Vietnam priests making them address a memorandum to the Pope, asking him to nominate *Ngo Dinh Thuc* a cardinal. This shady affair, exposed by some of the priests, complicated relations between the Vatican and Diem for quite a while.
>
> Diem set up a General Office of military chaplains for the Army. In fact this was only another secret police organization to carry out a purge of non-Diemists officers

> and soldiers. Churches were built in all garrison units, wasting military credits while soldiers' families including those of officers, lacked lodging, clinics, and schools. All military personnel were forced to take part in Catholic religious services. At the same time, Diem fomented dissension between Catholics and non-Catholics in order to divide the army into small opposing blocs.

The officers then refer to the official "philosophy of personalism" which U.S. tanks and bombers seem committed to uphold, a doctrine about which Mme. Nhu waxes eloquent in her frequent public appearances.

> In order to consolidate his regime, Diem has launched a sort of doctrine, the so-called "philosophy of personalism." Works hastily and arbitrarily edited by opportunist and highly-paid priests can not hide the odious, lying face of this doctrine... Diem has ordered that his "personalist philosophy" be accepted as official doctrine taught in schools and universities, considered as the "way of life" of the "Ngo Dinh Diem century," as he himself termed it in his pompous speeches.

The officers reveal little of the content of this doctrine, so aptly named for a regime as "personal" as that of Diem, except to say that it is "a bastard offspring" of a Christian humanist doctrine preached by the French Catholic philosopher, Jacques Maritain.

If the doctrine is vague, the outer manifestations of personalism are less so:

> Diem has ordered that statues and portraits of himself should be displayed at all military units, administrative services, public places. The cost is deducted from officers' and officials' salaries. Before each "salute the flag" ceremony in the barracks, or in theater or cinemas, everyone must salute Diem's portrait to the music of "Leader Ngo." One is reminded bitterly of a sort of Trujillo of the Far East, who wants to drag the history of Vietnam back for centuries.

Roster of the Family Dictatorship

A little more background on the Diem family and its ramifications — not from the officers' document — confirms and amplifies everything they have recorded. It rounds out Homer Bigart's comment in the *New York Times* that "South Vietnam is tightly run by the President and a small family circle." A list of immediate members, together with the background, of the family, follows:

Ngo Dinh Kha, father of the present Ngo brothers, was a Court mandarin, guardian of the eunuchs in the royal harem of Emperor Khao Dinh, the first of the Annamite (Central Vietnam) emperors to submit completely to the French invaders. He continued as a mandarin under French rule.

Ngo Dinh Diem, the President-dictator himself, first came into prominence as a sort of Minister of the Interior under the French at the time they were repressing the independence movement. After the Japanese invasion and then the French reoccupation

of Vietnam, Diem tried to counter the real resistance movement by forming a "non-violent" movement. When this received no support, he fled to Hong Kong and then to the United States. Rejected by a Catholic seminary, because he failed to qualify, he was picked up by Cardinal Spellman and the State Department to be groomed as "their man in Saigon."

As far back as 1950, when the State Department was juggling to improve its position *vis-a-vis* the French in Indo-China, it tried to get a government formed under Diem. But this failed. Four more years had to pass, by which time the United States was footing 80 percent of the French bill for the Indo-China war. Meanwhile Diem was being groomed by Senator Mike Mansfield and Cardinal Spellman for his future job. After Dien Bien Phu, in July 1954, as the French disaster in Indo-China was rushing to its climax, the Americans finally manipulated the overthrow of the pro-French government of Bu Loc and set up one under Ngo Dinh Diem. This was done with great haste, as by that time it was clear to the late John Foster Dulles that he was not able to block an Indo-China ceasefire. The next best thing was to have a government that would at least refuse to implement the Geneva Agreements, especially the key clauses concerning reunification. Ngo Dinh Diem was the ideal man and became the well-chosen instrument of U.S. policies in South Vietnam.

On November 23, 1955, he organized a referendum by which he replaced Emperor Bao Dai as Chief of State, and in April 1956, under strong U.S. pressure, the rest of the French expeditionary force withdrew from South Vietnam leaving the field wide open for U.S. intervention. By withdrawing their forces, the French government of the day also withdrew from their obligations under the Geneva Agreements to arrange nation-wide elections to unify the country by July 1956.

By one of those queer quirks of fate, Diem's life was once spared by the direct intervention of Ho Chi Minh, president of North Vietnam. Diem had been arrested in 1945 as a collaborator of the French and the Japanese in turn, responsible for the death of many resistance workers, as was his elder brother Khoi. The latter was executed, but as a gesture of clemency, Ho personally signed an order amnestying Diem.[12]

Ngo Dinh Nhu, the so-called *eminence grise*, is regarded as the real power in the country. In his earlier days he worked as an expert on police dossiers in Paris. Later when he had to flee from Hue, former capital of the Annamite Emperors, and make his way by foot to Saigon, the main thing he insisted on taking with him was a case of dossiers the French police had compiled on his own compatriots. Those who have been intimate with him say that compilation of dossiers is one of the ruling passions of his life

---

[12] A parallel case was Chou En-lai's intervention to save the life of Chiang Kai-shek, in December 1936, after the latter had been arrested by Chang Hsueh-liang, the "Young Marshal" of Manchuria, in what is known as the "Sian Incident."

and accounts for much of his power in the land. Apart from running the two "political clubs," as the officers and many Western correspondents refer to the parties mentioned earlier, Nhu heads the Security Service of the Presidency and in fact the threads of all the country's security services come together in his hands.

Tran Thi Le Xuan or *Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu* became a converted Catholic at the age of 16 in order to marry brother Nhu. Her father is *Tran Van Chuong*, Diem's Ambassador in Washington. American correspondents usually refer to her as the "influential First Lady of Vietnam." The officers in their memorandum are less kind:

> Tran Thi Le Xuan [they write] is a sort of South Vietnamese Messalina. Officially she is a deputy of the National Assembly. Unofficially she holds in her hands the complete economic, financial, and political powers of the Diem government. She leads an extremely riotous and questionable life with the handsome young colonels and generals whose names are the subject of endless gossip among the population.
>
> Extremely capricious, she has surrounded herself with a coterie of courtiers and courtesans, rewarding their services with her economic and political favors. Every time that Ha Di, the official family photographer, succeeds in catching a pose which expresses her sex appeal or her beauty, Mme. Nhu gives him a special bonus of 2,000 piastres.
>
> Despising all the ministers and high Diemist officials, Mme. Nhu dared on one occasion to smack the face of Nguyen Ngo Tho, Vice-President of the Republic, in public. The Exchange Control Office, as other official services, serve only as personal facilities for her fraudulent transactions.

It is common knowledge that apart from what Mme. Nhu is pleased to farm out among her brothers-in-law and Court favorites, she controls the economic affairs of the country. U.S. dollar aid passes directly through her hands, and the proportion that sticks to her fingers is known to be fabulous. It is she who allots the all-important military contracts which eat up by far the major part of U.S. aid. The Exchange Control Office is merely an extension of her personal bank account. She runs the lucrative "dollar traffic," the scale of which makes the "piastre traffic" scandals, in which French generals and ministers were involved in the early 1950's, look like very small business. (After all, the French never had $400,000,000 in one year — the American contribution for 1962 — to play with.)

One of the more spectacular and vulgar stunts of the "First Lady" is on March 18 each year — a day that commemorates a victory over Chinese invaders in the first century a.d. by the Trung sisters, national heroines who raised and headed an army against the invaders. Mme. Nhu, dressed up in armor similar to that of the sisters, parades the streets of Saigon, astride an elephant, exhorting taxi-girls and others to "emulate the Trung sisters and fight the Viet Cong."

Ngo Dinh Can has no official functions, but is the real power in Central Vietnam — that part of Annam which now lies south of the 17th parallel. His headquarters are at Hue. He is regarded as rough and uncouth by his more sophisticated elder brothers. By those who have suffered at his hands, he is described as a bloodthirsty tyrant who personally participates in the torture and execution of those he considers opponents. There is said to be bad blood between Can and his brothers. Can taunts Nhu and the others with not having been as successful in their repression of "Viet Cong" in the South as he has been in the Center, also of salting their money away abroad for future flight, while he intends to "fight it out in the jungle." Those who know him best, and my sources range from Western diplomats to Vietnamese functionaries who served under him and fled, say he is an illiterate who refuses to have any contact with foreigners, even including Americans.

Ngo Dinh Can controls all appointments in his fief — after the preliminary "Three D" qualifications have been checked. He runs the security services — too well for the peace of mind of brother Nhu, who does not like to share the monopoly.

Can has his own system of dossiers that do not always appear in, or coincide with, Nhu's own files. Brother Nhu, it is reported on impeccable authority, has several times tried to bring Can to Saigon and keep him under closer control. When all else failed, he created a Ministry of National Security and offered Can the post as Minister. But Can, with his jungle cunning, saw this as a trap. He refused. The Center is his personal fief which he does not intend to abandon, or share, with anyone.

Ngo Thi Thoan or *Ca Le*, sister of Diem, until she died in 1957, was the other feminine element in the Ngo "dynasty." She also lived in Hue. Her husband was a wealthy compradore businessman. Ca Le and brother Can controlled the allocation of military contracts in the Center; they had a complete monopoly on rice purchases and transport. Their economic interests and activities sometimes brought them into conflict with the family's Saigon branch. In some fields the Can-Ca Le combination found itself in rivalry with the Diem-Nhu-Le Xuan combination — a situation not unknown in feudal Europe between brother princelings.

Ngo Dinh Thuc is archbishop and apostolic vicar of Vinh Long, about 60 miles south of Saigon, and a center for Southwest Vietnam. Like brother Can, he has no official post, but no government or military appointments are made in his fief without his approval; he controls the work of all appointees, reporting back directly to brother Nhu. Thuc's religious activities do not inhibit him from joining the rest of the family in dipping his fingers deep into the economic pie. He has monopoly rights on exploiting the timber riches of the Southwest; rubber plantations demagogically confiscated from the French to prove Diem's "anti-colonialism" are run now by Thuc and — perhaps more directly in his line — he has the monopoly on the import and sale of sacramental wine.

Ngo Dinh Luyen is Diem's ambassador in London, whose wife died in circumstances so mysterious that the police may well reopen the case one day. Luyen promptly married her sister. He has been accused of pocketing 100,000 pounds in a scandal involving the liquidation of the Banque de l'Indochine in Saigon, but seems less involved in financial dealings than the rest of his family. Very mild criticism uttered during a Saigon visit in 1961, under the influence of liberals who had caught his ear in London, infuriated brothers Diem and Nhu, and Luyen considered himself lucky to escape back to his London post unscathed.

Among the prominent personages connected by marriage is *Tran Van Chuong*, Ambassador in Washington and father of Mme. Nhu. Another is *Tran Trung Dong*, son of a former wealthy North Vietnamese landlord, son-in-law of Ca Le, and ex-vice-minister of National Defense. Also there is *Nguyen Huu Chau*, married to Mme. Nhu's sister, and ex-Minister of Internal Affairs.

A revealing detail is worth mentioning. When Mme. Nhu's sister, Tran Le Chi, became involved in a Parisian morality scandal of such proportions that her husband could not overlook it and demanded a divorce, Mme. Nhu sprang to the defense. At a time when the Diem police machine was trying to force wives of VPA soldiers and resistance workers who had regrouped to the North (in accordance with the Geneva Agreements), to divorce their husbands, Mme. Nhu forced through the National Assembly a "Law for the Protection of Families" to ban divorce in South Vietnam except at the discretion of the President. At first there was considerable opposition, but after Mme. Nhu had assailed deputies as "cowards who did not know their jobs" and threatened those who voted against it with severe punishment, including exile, the law was passed. Sister Tran Le Chi was saved from public disgrace, but there was no let-up of police pressures for forced divorces by the wives of the regroupees.

It is a tight little family dictatorship which entirely justifies the term "oligarchic," so often used in the officers' memorandum. Shuffling around the names of ministers to aid U.S. public relations officers present a better picture to the West does not help. Nothing can cover up the camouflaged family appointments like those of Can and Thuc, not publicly announced but functioning in practice. The most expert of public relations officers cannot cover up the real state of affairs.

Corruption and Austerity

The question in many observers' minds is why U.S. pressures to avoid too monstrous a manifestation of the Ngo family dictatorship have been applied with such delicacy, with such restraint. Why, after U.S. experiences with the dictatorship of the Chiang-Soong-Kung families in Kuomintang China, the catastrophic results of which are

periodically presented in State Department documents, does the U.S. government back an almost identical set-up in South Vietnam today?

The short answer seems to be that in Asia at least it is only such anti-national elements that can be relied on to serve U.S. interests. An unholy bargain seems to be made in which the price exacted by collaborators for unlimited subservience to U.S. policies is an unlimited free hand to suck the last drop of blood out of their own people. This drives American policies into fatal contradictions. Instead of pushing ahead with their own aims, which are usually suspect enough these days, the U.S. government is constantly bogged down in trying to keep its instruments of policy in office. Enormous quantities of dollars and arms — and eventually men — are invested in this. And this is precisely what is happening in South Vietnam. That part of it is of course their problem. The other aspect is the blood and tears of tens of thousands of innocent people who are on the receiving end.

As to how the deal pays off for the local collaborationists, in this case the Ngo family, there are documents available which show that Ngo Dinh Diem personally had invested 830,000,000 piastres (equivalent to over $11,500,000) in various industries in South Vietnam, apart from money loaned to local banks. His capital in French, Swiss, and American banks, totalled 980,000,000 piastres by early 1962, most of it deposited at 35 piastres to the dollar (about half the official exchange rate). Among properties acquired by Diem in his personal name are 65 rubber plantations confiscated from the French — most of them now, however, are in areas administered by the National Liberation Front.

Archbishop Thuc's investments include the purchase in June, 1959, of the Charner department store, the biggest in Saigon, from its French owners for the equivalent of U.S. $4,000,000, and a big fleet of transport vehicles for exploiting the timber resources of the Southwest over which he has monopoly rights.

The economic activities of Mme. Nhu and her husband run parallel with those of the whole country, but the most lucrative has probably been the "dollar traffic," that is, buying unlimited quantities of dollars at the official rate, selling them on the black market for piastres at anything up to five times that rate, and reconverting the piastres back into dollars at the official rate, and so on *ad infinitum*. Rake-offs on selling import-export licenses, allocations of military contracts, sale of gold, and dozens of other rackets are useful sidelines. But the "dollar traffic" is the real money-spinner of the Nhu couple, aided by everything from military credits, to father Tran Van Chuong's diplomatic immunity as ambassador in Washington. Mme. Chuong is said to take a plane every month of Saigon.

Brother Can's economic activities are also specialized. He inherited from his sister the monopoly on rice purchases over the whole country. In a normal season, he buys, for instance, at a fixed price of 3,500 piastres per ton with immediate resale at 6,500 piastres. An average of 200 tons per month transported from the Mekong Delta regions

to Central Vietnam — obviously in Can's own transport fleet — is distributed through a ring of 16 merchants linked with Can, for 10,000 piastres a ton. In famine years the profits are even higher. Under the guise of setting up an Economic Department of the "National Revolutionary Movement," Can carved out monopoly rights for himself on the sale of all forest products from the 17th parallel down to Saigon. (South of Saigon it is brother Thuc who takes over.)

Most of these facts are known to Western diplomats in Saigon and occasional little snippets creep into the Western press. But in general there is a conspiracy of silence to hide these facts and to present the image of a gallant, little democratic regime fighting for its life against overwhelming odds, a romantic, beautiful "First Lady" in the vanguard.

Madame Nhu's vulgarity and hypocrisy occasionally won her reproaches from unsuspected sources. She was quoted, with obvious disapproval in the *New York Times* on June 13, 1962, for urging that U.S. troops that had been sent to Thailand because of the Laos crisis "should have been rushed to Laos to apply against the Communists, not the Talionic law of an 'eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth' but a doctrine of 'two eyes for one, two teeth for one.'" She accused the West of "cowardice" in accepting a neutral regime for Laos, and at a special press conference she announced that Americans had come to South Vietnam "to help us and not to dance." This was one of the reasons she gave for closing down all dance halls and banning dancing in general. As for the "taxi-girls," the professional dancing partners whom Madame Nhu had been trying to force into armed women's units, she said that "hunger would force them to mend their ways and perhaps take up nursing or teaching." In general, South Vietnam was to be put on an "austerity regime." This brought a sharp retort from someone in a position to know. He was Robert S. Browne, assistant program director of the U.S. foreign aid mission to South Vietnam in 1958-61.

> What really galls, however [he wrote in an angry letter to the *New York Times*] is for a member of the ruling family to speak of "austerity" in South Vietnam. Nothing could be a greater travesty on the word.
>
> Although the French may complain that Saigon isn't like the good old days, the fact of the matter is that one can dine sumptuously in a different restaurant every night in the week, complete with superb wines and delicious cheeses — all imported of course... Everything from out-board motors to fine perfumes may be purchased in Saigon shops. One must step carefully or risk being run down by one of the new sports cars which are now becoming so fashionable and so common on Saigon's boulevards. ...
>
> One finds austerity only among the poor and I daresay in Hanoi which may reveal something about the reasons for the Viet Cong's continuing success.
>
> As for the dance-hall girls becoming teachers — I'd like to ask Mme. Nhu what schools she suggests they attend. The thirst for education is already widespread

> among the Vietnamese; it's the means for quenching this thirst which is lacking. Saigon's public schools are so inadequate that every year they are obliged to turn away more pupils than they accept. Vietnam, in its peculiar type of austerity, devotes less than 3 per cent of its budget to education as compared with neighboring Cambodia's 22 per cent for the same item. (*New York Times*, June 20, 1962.)

In their memorandum, the officers of the November coup summed up economic affairs in the 'austerity' regime as follows:

> The national economy has been the personal affair of the Ngo family, completely in the hands of Mme. Nhu. Import-export transactions were used to acquire a secret fund to subsidize their political parties, to buy farms and properties in Brazil, in France, and to build up bank accounts abroad...
>
> American and other foreign economic aid are only "means of production" to enrich themselves. No one is surprised when the western press refers to Mme. Nhu as the "world's fourth multi-millionaire." Everyone in Saigon can name the big buildings, hotels and villas that now belong to the Ngo Dinh Diem family.
>
> Corruption is one of the grave incurable ills of the Diem regime. The construction of the market in Dalat [hill station about 150 miles Northeast of Saigon, where Diem maintains a summer capital], for instance, cost 60 million piastres according to the official price. In fact, half this sum miraculously disappeared into the pockets of the contractor — one of Mme. Nhu's relatives...
>
> Big industrial and commercial enterprises such as the Nong Son coal mines, the Paracel Islands Phosphate Co., the Vineteco Weaving Mills, the Saigon Bus Co., the Hiep Hoa Sugar Refinery, the Tru Ong Mari-time Transport Co., rubber plantations, etc. have now become the out-right property of the Ngo family. In other industrial and commercial companies, capital of the Ngo family reaches up to 60 or 90 per cent of total investments.
>
> The Diemist economic oligarchy has brought ruin to many of our handicraft workers, has given rise to black marketing and fraud on a large scale, has increased corruption and unemployment.

The officers had some interesting observations on the various espionage and "thought control" agencies which function under brother Nhu.

> Apart from the "political parties" which are only secret services with academic and innocent-sounding names, Diem set up also the "Service for Political, Cultural and Social Studies" attached to the presidency [and directly under Nhu] for overall control. The Central Military Committee of the "Labor and Personalism" party casts its heavy shadow over the army, taking over all decisions on promotions, nominations, changes, punishment and liquidation of officers and troops.

> The services of Military Security and "Observation and Liaison Group" handle espionage and purges in the army and subversive activities abroad and in North Vietnam.

Numerous other quasi-political and social organizations are listed with the observation that these "are only different branches of the Diemist secret services camouflaged under attractive labels." As for "thought control," this is exercised by the director-general of the "Military Chaplains' Office." The memorandum refers to a re-education camp called, appropriately enough, "Education Center for Personalism," set up under the eyes and nose of brother Thuc, at his Vinh Long headquarters. Here "priest-professors handle indoctrination in 'personalist philosophy' for officers, NCO's, officials, writers, artists — anyone forced to follow a "re-education course."

Finally, after a detailed and well-documented account of the crimes and corruption of the Ngo family dictatorship, the officers came to the real heart of the matter — the reason that pushed most of them into supporting the coup:

> In open violation of the Geneva Agreements, Ngo Dinh Diem by accepting SEATO bloc intervention has transformed half of our country into an American military base, directly threatening world peace. At the same time Ngo Dinh Diem is employing American arms to massacre the population. Ngo Dinh Diem has also followed an "interventionist" policy towards our fraternal neighbor countries, carrying out subversive activities in those countries. This belligerent policy, contrary to the wishes of the Vietnamese people, is directly threatening peace in Asia...
>
> At the same time U.S. military advisers, whose number increases every day, display their racist and arrogant attitude towards Vietnamese officers and troops. This has led to disaffection among all ranks of the Diemist army.
>
> Confronted with the crimes that Diem and his clique perpetrated against the South Vietnamese people and army, a certain number of patriotic officers took part in the *coup d'etat* of November 11, 1960. Others have crossed over to the ranks of the people's patriotic forces to continue the fight for democracy, peace, and unification of our country. For those who still remain in the Diemist army, the appeal of history and patriotism is tucked away in a corner of their heart. One can expect storms which will gather in due time and unleash a powerful, irresistible force finally to smash the oligarchic dictatorship of Ngo Dinh Diem and U.S. imperialism.

These are not the words of the "Viet Cong" propagandists, nor were the people that carried out the coup connected in any way with those who are labelled "Viet Cong." (Had they been, the coup would almost certainly have been successful.) They are officers who held key positions in the most trusted units of Diem's army, with access to impeccably accurate, primary sources of information. The reasons that prompted them to the

desperate, dangerous act of a military uprising are in themselves the greatest indictment of the Diem regime.

The November coup and the bombing of Diem's palace incidentally expose the fallacy of U.S. arguments that Diem's troubles spring from "subversion" and "aggression" from North Vietnam. The greatest dangers to which the Saigon dictator has so far been exposed came from units trained by the Americans themselves and installed by them in the capital as the most trusted instruments of their policies.

CHAPTER V: LIBERATION FRONT

Formation of the NLF

A month after the abortive officers' coup, a National Liberation Front was formed in South Vietnam from diverse elements which had been driven underground or into armed resistance to the Diem regime. These included former resistance members menaced by the mobile guillotines of Law 10/59, leaders of political parties and social organizations forced underground by Diem's secret police, and intellectuals driven to desperation by suppression of any liberal thought. Peasants who rejected the living death of the concentration camp villages participated, as well as members of the Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, and Binh Xuyen — armed religious sects-who had escaped annihilation by Diem's army or assassination squads. Included also were Buddhist leaders persecuted as a result of Diem's fanatical Catholicism, and representatives of minorities threatened with racial extinction. An Organizing Committee was set up to bring these elements together in the South Vietnam Front of National Liberation (for convenience I refer to it as the National Liberation Front or NLF), founded on December 20, 1960. The Organizing Committee became a provisional Central Committee.

For many months before setting up the NLF there had been a steady crystallization of the forces opposed to Diem. Probably the November officers' coup hastened the process. It had come like a bolt from the blue. There was no organization ready to back such a move, even had the officer leadership been united and politically astute enough to call for popular support.

The formation of the NLF meant, among other things, that in the future there would be an organization to turn to.

Throughout the year of 1960 there had been a whole series of peasants' uprisings, mainly to break out of "strategic" villages, "agrovilles," and other camouflaged concentration camps. In 300 of 493 villages in six provinces of central Cochin-China, for instance, the Diem administration had been kicked out, its representatives either prisoners of the population or done away with altogether, and the military posts destroyed.

The Diemist troops carried out a whole series of "mopping-up" operations in these six provinces (Ben Tre, My Tho, Kien Phong, Kien Tuong, Long An, and An Giang) during 1960, but, according to one of the first statements issued by the NLF, "faced with the fierce resistance of our compatriots, the repression ended in crushing defeats: 6,000 Diemist troops killed, wounded or taken prisoner; 8,000 crossed over to patriotic movement; 73,000 local big-shots, security agents, and police pimps chased out by the people, 70 military posts destroyed." In the western provinces the same story: "In the

last three months of 1960 alone, 4,500 Diemist troops put out of action; 3,500 crossed over to the people; 10,000 big shots and police agents chased out, 90 posts destroyed."

The disintegration of the Diem administration in hundreds of villages was another compelling reason for the formation of the NLF. Local administrative committees sprung up as Diem's officials melted away; self-defense forces came into being to protect the liberated villages. Soon after the formation of the NLF, liberated villages were administered by committees linked through district and provincial committees with the Provisional Central Committee of the Front. Throughout 1961, committees were elected at all levels, and the liberated areas grew in size. Preparations were made for a national congress at which basic questions of internal and foreign policy had to be hammered out and a long-term program adopted.

Between February 16 and March 3, 1962, in a large village which must be nameless as long as U.S. bombers patrol South Vietnamese skies, an historic First Congress of the NLF was held, with over 100 delegates elected from all over the country taking part. By coincidence, the congress started work just eight days after the Americans set up their High Command in Saigon and began direct military intervention in South Vietnam.

Plenary sessions were held in a solid, brick building with electric light and a loud-speaker system which broadcast the proceedings not only to the delegates in the hall, but to the local residents as well — a tribute to the security which reigns in the liberated areas where government of and for the people functions.

Three main political parties took part. The Democratic Party, formed in 1945, is a party of intellectuals and small business people, which supported the resistance war against the French from the beginning. The Radical Socialist Party, formed in 1961, represents intellectuals in Saigon and other urban centers and reflects the strong trend towards neutralism among intellectuals, even in the Diem administration and army. The People's Revolutionary Party, formed in December 1961, groups together former resistance members not affiliated to the other two parties. As its name suggests, the latter is further to the Left of the other two, and represents the worker-peasant movement and militant intellectuals.

These three parties form the hard core of the Front. Innumerable nuances rounding off sharp edges of difference between them at the congress were represented by delegates from social and religious organizations, and others like the Committee for Afro-Asian Solidarity, the South Vietnam and Saigon-Cholon Peace Committees, associations of writers and journalists, armed religious sects, and others. Most colorful were the delegates from the ethnic minorities in their national costumes. Delegates represented every province and major town in South Vietnam, and a good cross-section of the population.

The opening address was made by Dr. Phung Van Cung, member of the provisional Central Committee of the Front and Chairman of the South Vietnam Peace Council. A

well-known Paris-trained doctor, in 1946 he evaded French attempts to draft him into the Medical Corps of their invasion troops and supported the resistance instead. In October 1960, he fled Saigon with his family, preferring the hardships of the jungle to the comforts of Saigon under the Diem dictatorship. He summed up the situation which had led to the formation of the NLF.

"Hundreds of thousands of compatriots imprisoned, hundreds of others the victims of Diem's execution squads; famine conditions in the countryside, unemployment in the cities... Because of this, 14 million of our compatriots have resolved to continue the revolutionary traditions of our people and fight by all means to safeguard the right to live."

Following the setting up of the NLF, Dr. Cung said, the people's movement had taken on a much broader scope over the whole country, and in many regions of the Nam Bo and South Trung Bo the people had broken out of the enemy encirclement. Thanks to this, the people in those regions had been able to organize their free, economic life. The main task ahead, he said, was to "wipe out the present Diem regime, form a democratic government of national coalition with a foreign policy of neutrality, and as a final aim the peaceful reunification of the country." There was prolonged applause when he announced that the NLF had become affiliated to the Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee and to the World Peace Council. "This was a great joy and encouragement to us in our extremely difficult and complicated fight," he said. The principal task of the congress, he concluded, was to lay down the main lines of policy "for now and for the future," and to elect a Central Committee which "would reflect all the elements of national solidarity."

Delegates from the various organizations then presented their views on policy. The representatives of the Radical Socialist Party, for instance, presented an eight-point policy demanding an end to the Ngo family dictatorship, the formation of a national coalition government, and the restoration of democratic rights "such as individual liberty, freedom of press, speech, assembly and political activity, amnesty for political prisoners, dissolution of concentration camps and 'prosperity zones,' and the repeal of Law 10/59." The speaker laid stress on social reforms, and entered into detail on questions like pensions for the aged, maternity benefits, and child welfare. In foreign affairs, he urged a policy of neutrality and "diplomatic relations with all countries that recognize South Vietnam's independence and sovereignty."

The delegate from the Democratic Party recalled that for 16 years, his party had worked closely with all other organizations for national liberation, even before the resistance war started. During the last seven years, the delegate said, members had worked underground against the Diem dictatorship. The 1960 officers' uprising he characterized as "popular discontent transformed into a coup." The Democratic Party, he said, was highly interested in working with others for the final overthrow of the Diem dictatorship.

As for the newly-formed People's Revolutionary Party, the chief representative recalled that it had developed from an "Association of Ex-Resistance Members" which had been founded the previous year. It included everyone from professional revolutionaries to members of the armed religious sects and Chinese immigrants. Members supported the setting up of a "coalition government which represents the interests of all classes and political tendencies. This government must pursue a policy of national independence, democratic liberties, an improvement of living standards for the whole people, and the eventual aim of reunification. Foreign policy should be based on neutrality, non-alignment with any military blocs. Economic aid should be accepted from any countries as long as it is free from political conditions."

Following the opening statements in plenary session, delegates split up into committees to hammer out agreements on such questions as land reform, industry and trade, religious affairs, the armed struggle, relations with the North, minority problems, and the like. Elected as Chairman of the minorities' committee was Ybih Aleo, a well-known leader of the Rhade people, one of the most important of the ethnic minorities from the *Hants Plateaux*. At the time of the August 1945 revolution against the French, he was a non-commissioned officer in the French army (a very rare rank for anyone of minority origin). He had immediately joined the revolution, was captured by the French and after terrible torture was sentenced to death. But the sentence was never carried out because his prestige was high among the minority people and the French were fearful of the consequences. In splendid red and black national costume, he was one of the most colorful figures at the congress; he was subsequently elected to the Central Committee and as a vice-president of the NLF.

Program and Policies

After 15 days of hard work, a Program and a Declaration of the First Congress of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam were adopted, and a Central Committee was elected. Decisions adopted reflected the broad nature of the NLF and the real cross-section of the population that the delegates represented. There were trade union leaders and small business people, doctors and lawyers, Catholic priests and Buddhist bonzes, peasants and fisherman, members of the NLF's armed forces, including former officers from Diem's army.

A 10-point policy statement issued a month before the congress by the provisional Central Committee was endorsed and incorporated in the Declaration. It called for an end to Diem's war against the people, the withdrawal of U.S. interventionist forces, election of a new National Assembly and President through "free, non-fraudulent" balloting, the dissolution of concentration camps and the freeing of political prisoners, an end to press-gang conscription methods, the application of various measures to end

the economic monopoly of the Diem family, respect for the 1954 Geneva Agreements, and a foreign policy of peace and neutrality. This last point called for "the establishment of a neutral area in Indo-China, comprising South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos, the three countries to enjoy full sovereignty and independence." Economic aid would be accepted from all countries as long as "no political conditions are attached."

As the NLF already administers a very large proportion of the South Vietnamese countryside, and could easily be transformed into a provisional government, some points of the congress Declaration are of special interest — land reform, for instance:

> To recognize the right to land ownership for all landlords who do not work as agents of the imperialists. But they must carry out the present agrarian policy of the Front which is to reduce land rents and guarantee peasants' tenant rights. In the future, the national coalition administration, by negotiation and at fair prices will purchase part of the land from the landlords for distribution to the peasantry. Help will be extended to landlords to enter trade and industry. Membership of the Front is open to patriotic landlords.

As for Diemist troops ("even those who have committed crimes"), if they do not take part in attacks, or come over voluntarily, or do not offer resistance, they "will be released immediately after the battle and helped according to their wishes." Obviously with an eye on the November coup, there is this provision: "To army units and officials who rise up in mutiny or attempt coups directed against the U.S. imperialists and their agents, the NLF will give active support and immediate aid to help them continue the struggle."

The Declaration went into some detail on the question of neutrality, a point which aroused interest abroad, especially in neutralist-conscious Asia.

> In particular [it states] Congress had deep discussions on the foreign policy of peace and neutrality. Congress solemnly asserts that South Vietnam will establish diplomatic relations with all countries without distinction of political systems in conformity with the principles of the Bandung Conference... It will not enter into military alliance with any country whatsoever and will accept aid, economic and otherwise, from any country willing to provide such assistance without restrictive conditions.
>
> With regard to North Vietnam, we shall also conform to the spirit of the foreign policy of peace and neutrality. Reunification of the Fatherland will be solved step by step on the basis of the aspirations of all sections of the people of South Vietnam as well as those of North Vietnam, on the principle of freedom and democracy, negotiations and agreement between the two sides.

The statement went on to say that if the people are forced to fight, they will fight and win, but:

> We want to avoid unnecessary sacrifices and hardships, to alleviate suffering and avoid further devastation of our country. Having considered the problem from every aspect, the Congress delegates concluded that with a foreign policy of peace and neutrality, South Vietnam will be able to get unconditional aid — economic, technical, cultural, and social — from many countries with differing political systems in order to build up a prosperous and advanced South Vietnam. The experiences of peaceful and neutral Cambodia, which borders on our country, and the experiences of several other countries in Southeast Asia testify to this possibility.

At the time the congress was taking place Diem was laying claim to Cambodian islands a few miles off the Cambodian coast at Kep, and his troops were constantly violating Cambodian frontier areas. This lent added interest to the next point in the Declaration:

> Congress solemnly affirms that the policy of the NLF is to respect the sovereignty, independence, unity, and territorial integrity, the policy of peace and neutrality of the neighboring kingdoms of Cambodia and Laos. The Front and its armed forces solemnly undertakes not to encroach upon an inch of the territories of Cambodia and Laos. If U.S. imperialists and their agents attack Cambodia and Laos with troops based on South Vietnam or via South Vietnam, the Front and its armed forces will resolutely fight to oppose and check them. ... At the same time, Congress solemnly confirms the intention of the NLF to press for the formation of a zone of peace and neutrality, comprising Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam... Congress warmly welcomes the positive initiative of Prince Norodom Sihanouk concerning the formation of such a zone of peace and neutrality.

The importance of this categoric emphasis on neutrality can hardly be over-emphasized as showing the most reasonable and realistic way out of the present situation in Southeast Asia in general and South Vietnam in particular. It represents a sacrifice for those who were struggling for immediate reunification with the North, and one can imagine that this was the point which provoked the toughest discussions during the congress. It is a policy which would inevitably delay reunification and implies that reunification in any case will be on the basis of some sort of federation with very wide autonomy for North and South, or reunification on the basis of some measure of neutrality in the North. (It is a fact, incidentally, that North Vietnam, although a member of the socialist camp, does not have any military alliances.) The type of neutrality proposed by the NLF for South Vietnam is one that could be accepted by everyone, by East bloc countries as well as those of the West, without harming the interests of any. It points the way forward, out of the blood-bath that foreign intervention and an obscurantist despot have imposed on the country. It is a proposal which reflects the political maturity and realism of the NLF leadership. There are other points also which demonstrate realism and moderation. In relation to the French, for instance:

> Concerning France in particular, if France lives up to her responsibilities towards the Geneva Agreements and in view of the longstanding economic and cultural relations existing between South Vietnam and France, we will have an appropriate regard for that country.
>
> With regard to French nationals in South Vietnam, Congress affirms that the policy of the NLF is to respect the life and property and the legitimate interests and livelihood of all French nationals as long as they do not collaborate with the U.S. imperialists and their agents against the patriotic movement of the South Vietnamese people.[13]

Important decisions were taken to safeguard the interests of the minority peoples, with guarantees of complete equality in all fields and the creation of autonomous zones. This was of topical importance as the overwhelming majority of ethnic minorities were already living in liberated areas, and the new policies could immediately be put into practice. Vigorous efforts of the Diemists to win back the minority regions in the summer of 1962 failed. Diemist troops simply refused to enter many of the minority areas, protected as they are with spiked traps, ambushes which automatically discharge salvos of huge boulders, and — if they venture too close to the villages — poisoned arrows fired out of the jungle from deadly accurate cross-bows.

There was a note of warning in one passage of the Declaration which might be branded as "aggressive" by those who accept the myth that if a label like "Viet Cong" can be hung on Vietnamese, they automatically become foreigners in their own country, with no rights except to be annihilated.

> Congress affirms that if the imperative and legitimate aspirations of the South Vietnamese people go unheeded, and if the U.S. imperialists and their agents plunge deeper into their bloodthirsty aggression. ... the people of South Vietnam and the National Liberation Front will use all forms of struggle, will take all measures to fight resolutely to the end in order to save themselves and their country — to liberate South Vietnam, to defend independence and democracy, and completely overthrow treacherous dictators. In case of necessity, the people of South Vietnam and the NLF will use their legitimate and effective right to appeal to the people and the government of North Vietnam, to peace-loving and democratic peoples and governments the world over, irrespective of political systems, requesting that active support, including material and manpower support, be afforded to the just struggle of the South Vietnamese people. U.S. imperialists and their agents must bear the full responsibility for any disastrous consequences.

[13] In this connection, it is worth recalling that in North Vietnam, after the Geneva Agreements, the government was perfectly willing to safeguard French economic interests and even more specifically to run certain enterprises like the Hongay Coal Mines in partnership with the French owners. The latter wanted to do this, but very strong American pressures aimed against any form of "coexistence with communism" forced the French to abandon their own interests.

Some people sincerely devoted to peace may be disturbed by the militant note of this pronouncement and its implications. One can only recall that if the German and Italian people had been able to rise in revolt against fascism and smash it, the world would have been spared the horror of World War II. The people of South Vietnam are fighting with arms in their hands against an Asian neo-fascism no less dangerous for world peace than was European fascism of the 1930's. Their leaders are quite conscious of this.

They are also conscious of their responsibilities to take every step possible — short of asking their people *en masse* to lay down their heads on the neck-rest of Diem's mobile guillotines — to secure a peaceful settlement: "We will not miss any chance at all to improve the disastrous situation that has now overtaken South Vietnam, to end the bloodshed there, to promote a settlement which will help relax international tensions."

The Leadership

Finally the congress elected 31 members of the Central Committee and other leading officers. Nguyen Huu Tho, a well-known Saigon lawyer, was elected president. His real political career had started, appropriately enough, when he led a demonstration in Saigon, in March 1950, against the visit of three U.S. warships. They had been despatched as an open display of support for the French in the "dirty war." Nguyen Huu Tho had not taken part in the resistance war but this bullying display of force outraged him, as well as several hundred thousand other Saigon residents. They showed their feelings in a great demonstration. The warships left the following day, but Tho, who had marched at the head of the demonstrators, was arrested by the French and deported to Lao Chau, north of Dien Bien Phu, from where he was freed by the VPA in 1952. He took up his law practice in Saigon again after the Geneva Agreements, but because he was active in the Saigon-Cholon peace movement, he was arrested by Diem and imprisoned in Tuy Hoa in Central Vietnam. In October 1961, guerillas attacked Tuy Hoa prison, liberating Nguyen Huu Tho and other political prisoners.

Dr. Phung Van Cung, who made the opening address, was one of five vice-presidents elected. Another was Vo Chi Cong, an old-time revolutionary from Saigon whom the French had condemned to deportation for life in the Poulo Condor "hell prison." He was liberated after the 1945 revolution and played an active part in the resistance war. The other vice-presidents are: Huynh Tan Phat, a Saigon architect, general secretary of the Democratic Party; Ybih Aleo, mentioned earlier, and Dai Due Son Vong, representative of the Cambodian minority or Khmer Krom. Central Committee members included Tien Thien Ngoc, leader of all Cao Dai sects; Tran Huu Trang, a very well-known veteran Saigon actor; Thich Thien Hao, a Buddhist bonze; Huynh Cuong, a Khmer intellectual; and Josef Marie Hohue Ba, representing the Catholic community. Six members are well-known intellectuals working in Saigon and Hue, who could not be present at the

congress and who were elected with pseudonyms for obvious reasons. Among those elected were some who had held high posts in the Diem administration. Three of the 21 reserved places on the Central Committee are for vice-presidents to be elected as the vacant places are filled.

Later I was able to interview Professor Nguyen Van Hieu of the Radical Socialist Party, who had been elected secretary-general of the NLF. A man with a calm, reflective face, he was a professor of mathematical sciences before he left the university to take part in the resistance war against the French.

He stressed the complete security in which the 15-day congress had taken place. "Thanks to the good quality radio transmitters the Americans have supplied us," he said with a quiet smile, "we were able to keep in contact with our bureaus all over the country throughout the congress. Communications worked excellently."

I asked about supplies for the Front's armed forces: "In all major actions now," he replied, "we use captured U.S. arms. A great quantity has been brought over to us by deserting troops, often whole units. Others we capture in raids. For instance, in September 1961 we attacked Phuoc Thanh, a provincial capital about 60 miles north of Saigon. In an action that lasted precisely three minutes we were masters of the situation. We bagged 400 arms of all categories, especially recoil-less cannon and Garand rifles that we like very much. Earlier, we carried out a similar action at Trang Sup, in Tay Ninh province. There we had a haul of over 1,000 weapons of all types. I know the Americans like to claim we get our arms from North Vietnam. But that would be stupid even if we could get them. Think of the transport problem. The Americans on the other hand," he said with a laugh, "deliver them right there where we need them. Not only arms but other essential equipment we need."

As to the extent of territory actually administered by the NLF, he said: "It's difficult to ink that in on a map for various reasons. There are large zones, comprising hundreds of villages completely liberated, without a Diem official or military post. There are others completely under our control but where there are islands of military posts and vestiges of Diem's administration who are in effect our prisoners. As long as they behave we leave them there. There are other areas of disputed territory, which we control by night and where they patrol by day. There are smaller areas where the Diem administration has also ceased to function; the people have chased them out, but where front committees have not yet been established. Don't forget we have not been functioning long and in some places the liberation movement goes faster than we can organize administration. By and large you can say that Diem controls the towns and strategic routes, but not all of the latter. We hold the countryside. Moreover, if Diem and the Americans want to move outside Saigon, they can only do so by mounting a military operation. They dare not move even 10 or 15 miles north of the city — another illustration of the lack of popularity, the weakness of the regime.

"How could it be otherwise?" he asked. "The terror and brutal repressions have driven everyone into resistance. According to incomplete figures, over the past eight years, 105,000 of our compatriots have been killed and at the present moment there are over 350,000 held in the 874 prisons and concentration camps. There are over 6,000 children held in the prisons, many of them born in prison. They have known no other world than the four walls of a prison and what they can see through the bars of their cells. Countless others have been born in prison and died there without ever having seen the sun.

"The repression and attempts to force the peasantry into concentration camp villages has had disastrous effects on production. The South used to be one of the great rice-exporting countries of the world, with an average export of 1,500,000 tons a year. By 1960 there was no exportable surplus at all. In 1961, about 100,000 tons were imported and imports will reach over 300,000 tons for 1962 and even with that, there are famine conditions in many of the cities. The cities are full of unemployed, beggars, and prostitutes — thousands of the latter in Saigon alone. It is conditions of this sort that have rallied the most diverse elements into our Liberation Front. All political, social, and religious tendencies, all racial groupings are represented in the Front. Officers and functionaries of the Diem administration have joined in substantial number. Within the first year of its foundation, over 10,000 Diemist soldiers came over to the Front, most of them with their weapons and in many cases complete units, including officers. This is because the Front represents the broadest aspirations of all sections of the population apart from the few really big landlords and a handful of compradore capitalists whose personal fortunes are intimately linked with the Diem regime...

About relations with the French, Professor Hieu said: "Most of the French rubber plantations are in our areas. Whether they like it or not, the French owners and managers have to have good relations with us. They pay their taxes to us. There are several tens of thousands of acres of their plantations in our hands. But the French ought to understand this. If the Americans increase their intervention, we shall fight till the end. We have no other alternative. Life is worth nothing if it has to be lived under a fascist regime. For the French this will mean they will have no interests left at all. If they like to use their influence to halt U.S. intervention, we are ready to safeguard their interests. Not just for now, but later too. But if they support the Americans in their intervention, they will have only themselves to blame for the results. We are ready at any time to sit down and discuss things with them."

He was one of those who believed neutrality was the best, the only realistic solution for South Vietnam. "Since the 1960 November coup, the idea of neutrality has gained much ground," he said. "There is a movement for neutrality in all sections of Diem's army, even among upper cadres in the army and in the administration too. Diem knows

this. He is fearful of it. His ideologists have organized courses in the army, in universities and schools against neutrality. He hurls abuse at Prince Sihanouk because he is for neutrality. But the idea is gaining ground everywhere.

"It is the weakness of Diem and his supporters, their utter political bankruptcy, that has given birth to the Front and is responsible for the wide prestige it already enjoys."

Nguyen Van Hieu's remarks about the source of arms was strikingly illustrated some weeks after our conversation by a report in the New York Times of June 7, 1962. It referred to the capture of two train loads of arms and other supplies, "in a bold, daylight raid ninety miles west of Saigon." The despatch also confirmed the lack of control Diem was able to impose even in regions quite close to the capital. "Attacks on the railroad linking Saigon with the northern provinces have become so frequent," reported Bigart from Saigon, "that night movement was abandoned two months ago. The trains run only in daytime and under heavy escort." The two trains in question were sandwiched in between two armored trains for their protection, he reported. One of the escort trains was put out of action by a swift attack, a bridge blown up between the second one and the freight trains. "It was feared the pro-Communists made off with considerable food and arms," Bigart writes. The previous day, the same paper had reported a guerilla raid on a district headquarters in Ba Xuyen province in which "the Viet Cong guerillas made off with considerable plunder, including two mortars, five machine-guns, ten rifles, fifteen carbines, three pistols, a shotgun and several radios."

The American supply system functioned very efficiently indeed — for the guerillas.

Views of North Vietnam on Neutralism

A neutralized South Vietnam as provided for in the NLF program is obviously a question of far-reaching implications. It was a matter that I raised with President Ho Chi Minh, whom I had the good fortune to meet in Hanoi, some weeks after the NLF Congress. I asked whether the government of the North, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, was prepared to accept a neutral South. After all, the Vietminh which President Ho had guided over its long road of national liberation had fought to liberate the whole country. The Geneva Agreements had recognized the Vietminh victory and had provided for the full fruits of that victory to be reaped by July 1956, in the form of general elections for a single government of all Vietnam. The NLF were now quite solemnly committed to a policy that would put South Vietnam in a zone together with Cambodia and Laos, with a policy quite different from that of the government of North Vietnam, especially as concerns home affairs.

President Ho received me at his residence, the former servants' quarters behind the French Governor-General's palace (now the Presidential palace) in Hanoi. He was

bronzed, more relaxed and robust than when I had first met him eight years ago as he emerged from the jungle shadows in his bamboo hut headquarters in the Viet Bac.

He did not ponder long over my question, blunt as it was. "It is up to the people in South Vietnam," he said, "to decide whether South Vietnam is to have a neutral regime or any other regime. Nobody can go counter to the people's aspirations." He recalled something that I had long forgotten — the Program of the Fatherland Front (successor to the Vietminh), as worked out in 1955. "The program lays down," continued President Ho, "that in every respect — historical, geographical, economic, cultural, social, and national — our country is a united country which definitely no force can partition... But today, the social and political situation in the North and South are different... We should take into due consideration the practical situation in both zones, the legitimate interests and aspirations of all sections of the population and at the same time, by negotiations, we should arrive at the holding of free general elections in order to achieve unity, without any coercion or annexation of one side by the other." But, he pointed out, the program also stated that: "On account of the present situation in both the North and the South, popularly-elected councils and administrative organs with wide powers shall be set up in each locality."

It was not President Ho's job to go into detail. But what he was clearly saying was that, as far back as 1955, the Vietminh leadership recognized that it was not inevitable that South Vietnam would take the same socialist road taken by North Vietnam. Accordingly, at that time provisions were made in the Fatherland Front program for South Vietnam to have a great deal of autonomy.

When I put the question as to what he considered a minimum arrangement, pending eventual reunification, he replied: "A normalization of relations between the two zones in the economic and cultural field, as well as trade and travel between the two zones and free postal exchange."

I put similar questions to Prime Minister Pham Van Dong of North Vietnam, and he was even more categoric. "This is really a question for our compatriots in the South to decide. Only they can make this decision. They are in the middle of a fierce struggle. Only they can decide on the basis of the actual situation. But we will support them, now and in the future. If neutrality is their decision, we will support that. There is no hypocrisy in this. If the compatriots in the South believe this is the best way to end the bloodshed, to restore a normal life in the South, we will back them. We have faith in their judgement."

"Even if this delays reunification?" I asked.

"They are on the spot," he replied. "It is their judgment that counts. We can accept their program for a neutral regime in the South, not just as some tactic, but as a long term solution. We are sure they have carefully weighed all the factors in the light of the actual situation in the South and the aspirations of our compatriots there. Of course we believe-and it is also in their program — that the final aim must be reunification, but this

can come about by a long, step-by-step process. What the final form of reunification will be no one can predict today."

Later, in Cambodia, I sought the views of Chief of State Prince Norodom Sihanouk on this question: "First of all," he said, "the dangerous development of the situation in certain countries of Southeast Asia justifies our anxiety. Foreign intervention is more and more open, more and more direct, and this greatly endangers peace in this part of the world. I am absolutely convinced that if the proposal to create a neutral zone in Southeast Asia which I presented to the General Assembly of the United Nations in 1960 had been accepted, it would have been possible to avoid the present impasse. I believe today that the only correct and peaceful solution to the conflicts that ravage Laos and South Vietnam today is in a neutralization, accepted, controlled, and guaranteed by the great powers of the two camps."

The considered opinion of those leaders most concerned with the problem of South Vietnam in thus very clear. Only dictator Diem and the U.S. State Department still cling to John Foster Dulles' definition of neutrality as "immoral and dangerous." Such a definition can only be accepted by people of bad consciences, and bad intentions. Most people in Southeast Asia see in neutralism the way to rid themselves of foreign interference and live the lives they want to live.

CHAPTER VI: MINORITY RIGHTS AND WRONGS

"Taming" the Highland Peoples

The Rhade is the largest and most important of the ethnic minorities in the highlands of the South, almost indistinguishable from the Jarai, another of the larger groups. As distinct from the ethnic minorities of North Vietnam's mountain regions, who live apart in separate villages, the Rhade, Jarai, Bhanar, Van Kieu, and others form a community of 23 minority groups who live intermingled in the villages of the *Hants Plateaux*, the highlands which form all the western part of Central Vietnam.

Diem has been making a desperate effort to "tame" them and, when that failed, to "concentrate" them or to wipe them out. There were large liberated areas in these regions during the resistance war against the French. The minority peoples' taste of racial equality, and of the rudiments of education and public health under the resistance administration had insulated them against Diemist tactics. The attempts to force them into "strategic villages" and "model settlements" has been dealt with in an earlier chapter. By early 1962, only four remained of several score "strategic villages" originally set up. In the rest, the minority people broke out, sometimes killing the guards, sometimes taking them back with them to their highland homes.

Diem has tried to copy old French tactics of buying up minority chiefs or seigneurs and the feudal notables who serve them, and then pitting one minority against another and all the minorities against the Vietnamese. For instance, in Dae Lac province, Diem agents on one occasion spread word among the Thuot clan that the Rak Clay clan was preparing to attack and wipe them out. The same rumor was spread among the Rak Clay clan, with the agents offering both clans modern arms. There was a terrific fight with many clansmen killed on both sides, before Rhade leaders were able to find out what really happened and stop the fight.

Along the Cambodian border, it was proven beyond any doubt, Diemist troops, dressed in black peasant garb like "Viet Cong," had raided Khmer Krom (Cambodian minority) villages, killing people and cattle to incite bad relations between Khmer Krom and "Viet Cong." On several occasions, on the bodies of casualties among the attackers, elements of Diemist uniforms were discovered in the peasants' garb.

This sort of trickery often led to unexpected consequences. A gnarled old Jarai warrior, whom I found resting in one of the frontier areas, after relating the usual story of how people from his hamlet had been forced to concentrate with others in a "model" village, told me that a Diem mobile police unit constantly visited the new village and warned the inmates they were suspected of "Viet Cong" sympathies. "We said we knew nothing about the Viet Cong. One day, the officer said: "If any Viet Cong come here, it's

your job to catch them and hold them till we came back." We agreed. A day later, some armed 'Viet Cong' in black peasants' clothes came to the village. But we knew they were some of the police troops, sent to trap us. Some of our people had seen them changing clothes. We grabbed them, gave them a terrific beating and tied them up, giving them nothing to eat. Next day the police unit came back and we handed the men over. The officer was very pleased and praised us for our vigilance. But the agents were furious.

"We were getting tired of this unit anyway, massacring people everywhere, and we'd had enough of living like animals in a cage. One day we sent word to the unit that we had captured a big group of Viet Cong. They came in a hurry and we were ready for them. We laid an ambush with our crossbows as they came swarming up a jungle trail. When they rushed into the undergrowth they fell into deep trenches we'd dug, with bamboo spikes at the bottom. We wiped them all out — 35 altogether — and got their arms. All of us, from the three hamlets that had been concentrated, went back to the mountains."

It is not easy to buy up the seigneurs these days. Patriots among them played a leading role during the resistance; traitors who collaborated with the French were dealt with. But in general, the role and prestige of the seigneurs had changed. Those who headed the resistance have enormous prestige — among all the minorities, not just among their own group. Those who were merely neutral, have no authority. Those who collaborated are enemies in hiding. The facts of life in the resistance years brought the minorities closer together; the power and prestige of the seigneurs and notables were drastically reduced; suspicions long fostered by the French and local feudal rulers between minorities and Vietnamese melted away; respect for the Vietminh and President Ho was enormous.

In Hanoi I asked an expert on the minority question, who had spent the entire resistance period in the *Hants Plateaux*, to what extent was it correct that the French had had "roots" and "loyalties" in the minority areas. I had often heard this expressed by former French officers and officials I met in Cambodia. "They had some loyalties among the upper classes of the Rhade and Jarai," he replied. "This was among the old seigneurs, but they never had a whole minority with them. The Americans now also have a few seigneurs with them. But the latter are mostly completely discredited. Because of their cruelty and racism, Diem and his agents are hated and despised; the Americans also for backing them. Diem and Americans have taken over from the French and the old Vietnamese feudalists the term 'Moi.' It simply means 'savage,' but it is still the current term of reference to the minorities in the South."

From the first days of his regime, Diem tried to turn the clock back. A girl from the Ta Oi minority, whom I met in a frontier village north of the 17th parallel, gave me a lurid example of Diem's early attempts to "tame" the minorities and discipline the Vietnamese. She was Kan Djul Pien from Ta Ru hamlet, in the mountainous region of Quang Tri province, not far south of the demarcation line. She had made her way over

the mountains from the South and settled down to rice-growing in her new home. A stocky young woman, her story justified the somber expression on her brown face. She wore her national costume, a two-inch embroidered band down the shoulder seams and around the V-neck of her smock; a concentric series of red hoops around her long, black skirt ending in a broad red band at the hem. The main part of her story dealt with what must have been one of the earliest attempts — in 1955 — at concentrating minority villages. Although I interviewed her a thousand or more miles away from Nyao Hlung, the Jarai girl mentioned in an earlier chapter, the story was strikingly similar up to the point of concentrating four minority villages from the highlands with one village in the valley.

"I lived in the valley village," she said. "So at least we didn't have to build a new home. But it was awful. There was a military post with 200 troops at the only entrance to the village. They were brutes. They killed and stole pigs and chickens as they liked and you couldn't say a word. They raped the village women and nobody could do anything about it. Everybody, even those of us from the valley, wanted to leave and go to the mountains. One day a big delegation went to the post commander and asked permission for those from the mountains to return to their home villages. Later the same day the troops rounded up those who had taken part. They separated the Vietnamese from the others. That was always their policy — to set one against the other. 'You support those who want to go to the mountains,' the officer said. 'That means you've got Viet Cong ideas. You need some reeducation.' The troops bound their hands behind their backs and marched them off. Days went by and they didn't come back. Six days passed and then a delegation of 41 women went to the post and asked for the return of their husbands and sons. The women never came back either.

"One day I was fishing for shrimp in the river with my mother. We were terrified to find the body of a woman, one of our neighbors; then another and another. We went back to the village afraid at first to say a word except to our very closest friends. But about that time one of our own Ta Oi men came back. He had been grabbed for the Diemist army and served for a while in the local post, but was horrified at what had happened. The men who had been taken away were all shot the same day they were arrested. When the women went to the post, they were told: 'Your men are being reeducated. Go back home. Go back to work.' They didn't believe this. They started to shout; 'Give us back our husbands', 'Give us back our sons.' At this they were tied up and marched to the banks of the river where they were bayoneted to death, then thrown into a deep pool with heavy rocks piled on top of the bodies. The same day he returned, the Ta Oi man who told us went off to the mountains. We never saw him again.

"Life was just impossible. Every day someone was beaten or tortured for nothing at all." This was the period before the minority peoples started to organize and hit back.

Diemist agents felt themselves complete masters of the situation in those days; they were very sure of themselves.

Apart from the cruelty and brutality with which everything was done it was also sheer idiocy of policy, Diem's own backwardness, that drove the minorities into opposition. Even in the few schools that were set up in minority areas, teaching was exclusively in Vietnamese. It was forbidden for pupils to address each other in their native tongue. What would it have cost Diem to permit the Khmer Krom, for instance, to have their own schools? There are five or six hundred thousand of them in South Vietnam living for the most part in compact groups, in villages where they form 90 percent of the population. The same with the Chams, a large Muslim minority, descendants of the Champha empire which at one time embraced all of central Vietnam. The leaders of the Cham community in Cambodia have recently petitioned the United Nations, the Arab League, and leading world powers to intervene in what they describe as a "genocidal policy" towards the several hundred thousand Cham Muslims in South Vietnam.

"Our people are massacred and arrested without any reason given at all," said Sar Tou Long who heads the Cham community in Cambodia. "They are thrown into jails and concentration camps, no charges ever made, no trials. Their lands are expropriated, mosques closed or burned down. Where they are open, prayers are controlled by Diem's police; pilgrimage to Mecca is forbidden. Once a Cham is arrested, he is never seen again. They are hounded from place to place, village to village. All they want is to till their fields in peace, pursue their fishing [Chams in South Vietnam as in Cambodia specialize in fishing, their womenfolk in weaving], and live as they have always lived. Where are they to go? Thirty or forty a month slip over the border into Cambodia. We give them what help we can, then they return. Always on the move."

We were sitting on the verandah of a mosque a few miles from Phnom Penh, together with other Muslim dignitaries, including the chief of the mosque, Imam Sarang Youssef.

"It is infinitely worse for our compatriots than it was under the French," said the Imam. "They try and force our people out of villages where they have lived for centuries. They force them to change their names. There are to be no more Abdul-lahs or Mohammeds — only Nguyens and Ngos. All Cham schools are closed; all the Koran schools as well. There is no religious instruction. Our language itself is banned; it is no longer considered a legal tongue in South Vietnam. And Chams are regarded as third class citizens, not allowed to show their faces in the towns. To perform any religious ceremonies, special permission must be asked each time from the authorities. Now our people are really faced with complete extermination, physically and culturally.

"What are we to do about our brothers in South Vietnam?" he asked. "Our fate is linked with theirs; we have one blood, one religion. We feel we have to do everything possible to arouse the conscience of the people everywhere. Maintaining even the

rudiments of Cham culture is treason in Diem's eyes. The main relics of our past used to be kept in a shrine at Tourane, the former capital of our empire. Diem has had them removed — to somewhere in Saigon. Nothing is to be left to us."

The Chams were suffering in fact from a four-fold oppression. First, they suffer because they are Chams and Diem is a feudal Annamite mandarin. In the past there were bitter wars between Chams and Annamites. About the time the French invaded Vietnam, the Annamites had launched a genocidal war against the Chams, apparently with the idea of exterminating them altogether. In any case, the Cham leaders I spoke with considered one of the few positive aspects of French occupation that the Chams were saved. But mandarin Diem had taken up the extermination campaign where the Annamite emperor had left off. Secondly, they were Muslims and Diem a bigoted Catholic. Thirdly, they were a minority people and Diem's brand of fascism despises all minority peoples. Fourthly, they live mainly in the frontier areas — in the lower reaches of the Mekong — which Diem was trying to transform into a gigantic no-man's land. In general, the Chams are a passive people who live almost exclusively in their riverside villages and if left to themselves would never have given Diem a moment of trouble. In Cambodia they have complete racial equality with rights to use their own language and to send their children to Koran schools, as long as they also attend the general schools of the government.

"Here we are all Cambodians," concluded Sar Tou Long. "We live with the Khmers as brothers. Any who can afford it can go to Mecca without any hindrance. There is absolutely no discrimination against us."

The Cham leaders begged me to do what I could to present the plight of their co-religionists to the world.

As for the situation of the Khmer minority under Diem's regime, Prince Sihanouk had the following to say on August 23, 1961, in his opening speech at the 11th National Sangkum Congress at Phnom Penh:

"As I mentioned in the beginning of my speech, there is but one black spot in the picture. It is the unhappy and painful lot of our compatriots in Kampuchea Krom.

"We have done all that is humanly possible and we shall continue to do so. But can we hope for miracles when we have against us a country in the toils of civil war... a Government which is no longer master of its internal situation and which obstinately and categorically refuses to recognize that there are Cambodians living in Cochin China? On this pretext it refuses the right of our Government to negotiate with it about the interests and rights of the large Khmer minority in Cochin China...

"We hope that the opinion of all nations considered civilized will one day take pity on the 600,000 Khmers in distress in Cochin China... deprived of all the rights enjoyed by all minorities in all countries of the world, beginning with those in China and the USSR."

The sort of conditions the Prince was referring to were those described by the refugee bonze at the Phnom Den pagoda, referred to in an earlier chapter.

In the "Blue Book" which the U.S. government published to justify in advance its armed intervention in South Vietnam, in the section dealing with the alleged horrible consequences of a unified Vietnam there is this passage (p. 51): "Promises of 'autonomy' for minority peoples would be forgotten except by the disillusioned highland tribes themselves. Absolute political control would rest with the Communist party..." As the implication is that "autonomy" is attractive to the minority peoples, one might well ask why the Americans have not pushed Diem into creating autonomous zones for the Chams, Khmers, and the minorities of the *Hants Plateaux* areas. It would seem to be a more effective way of winning loyalties than napalming villages to force the occupants into concentration camps.

The Autonomous Zones of the North

Autonomous Zones have been set up in North Vietnam. The Thai-Meo Zone was formed on the first anniversary of the Dien Bien Phu victory, the Viet-Bac Zone on August 19, 1956. I can recommend nothing better for Diem and his U.S. "advisers" than to make a careful study of what has been done there. It is a matter into which I probed very deeply in my talks and travels in the North. I visited the headquarters of both Autonomous Zones at Son La and Thai Nguyen, respectively; went to dozens of villages of the various minorities; visited their schools and institutes, and spent many hours at the Committee for National Minorities in Hanoi. I am convinced that the bold and imaginative handling of the minorities' problems in North Vietnam is one of the great achievements of the government. It could be a model not only for South Vietnam, but for many other older established governments in Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

The minority population of the North amounts to 2,563,-209, or 14.8 percent of the total population. They hold 16.5 percent of seats in the National Assembly, which makes the overall policy decisions on minority questions. In the Viet-Bac Autonomous Zone, 72 percent of all administrative personnel are drawn from the minorities; in the Thai-Meo Zone the figure is 49 percent. In every ministry of the North Vietnam government there is a section which deals with minority problems, and all the way down through the administrative departments places are reserved for minority representatives. There are Minorities Committees of the National Assembly and of the Central Committee of the Lao Dong party, to initiate policies in the specific interests of the minorities and to control their application.

Policy from the time of the August revolution.[14] written into the 1960 Constitution, laid down that all Vietnamese citizens are equal before the law, and racial discrimination or contempt would be punished as violations of the law. The advance towards socialism must be accomplished by "mutual aid" between all nationalities, taking into account the different characteristics of each. These were not just dry words on paper. All policies from land reform to foreign trade took these "differing characteristics" and "racial equality" into account. Neither money nor effect was spared in selecting and training personnel from the minorities for places in local, provincial, and central government jobs. During my travels I met people from the minorities at every level, from top ranking generals to factory managers and local party secretaries. I also found constant care, often priority treatment, for the minority peoples everywhere. In an interview with the Vice-Minister of Education, for instance, I found him deeply concerned over the fact that most of those still illiterate were from the minority peoples, despite the fact that a tremendous job had been done in general in education.

"It is just not good enough," he said, "that there are still 800,000 illiterates in our country between the ages of 12 and 50 and that most of them are among the minority peoples." He mentioned that in three provinces, however — Hoa Binh, Lang Son, and Cao Bang — illiteracy had been abolished.

He went on to say that a major problem was the absence of a written language or as in the case of the Thais, of a uniform written language. Textbooks have now been written in the languages of the major minority groups. Later, if the minority groups wish to, they will be able to study Vietnamese as a second language. It was through these methods that illiteracy has been ended for the Thais, Meo, Thi, Nung, and Muong — by far the biggest groups, together forming a majority of the population among North Vietnam's 63 ethnic minorities.

"For a long time," continued the Vice-Minister, "under the local feudalists and then under the colonialists, the mountain peoples were completely neglected as far as education was concerned. Now our policy is to have the mountains catch up with the plains in the shortest possible time. An enormous effort still has to be made. It is contrary to policy that the greatest proportion of illiteracy should still be in the mountains. And it is not at all right that the young people of the mountain areas who have completed general education should constitute only two percent of students at the higher educational establishments. Two years ago, we set up special secondary schools for teachers' training, agriculture, and medicine in the two autonomous zones, but we still have no higher educational establishments. This is a big weakness in our work which must be corrected." And he revealed that at that moment — it was the end of

[14] The uprising in 1945 against the French when they attempted to reestablish colonial rule at the end of World War II.

February 1962 — a conference was in session to cope with the problem of speeding up educational facilities for the minorities.

The attitude of the Ministry did not come from any compulsion to compete with the South, since there was no competition from Diem's regime on this score. The problem was being tackled on its own merits. The Khin majority people accepted as their solemn duty the task of helping the minority peoples catch up with them — to pay off old debts incurred not by them but by feudalists and colonialists.

At the time of the ceasefire, the minority peoples in North Vietnam were 95 percent illiterate, as they are today in the South. A start had been made during the resistance years. But this was enough only to give people a taste. The business of fighting the war was too all-demanding. Territory changed hands too often. Among some groups like the Lolos and others, illiteracy was 100 percent. But by the end of 1962, it would be wiped out completely among the valley and plains-dwellers. If in the 1955-56 school year there were 60,000 pupils among the minorities, there were over 200,000 in the 1961 — 62 school year. Nearly 2,000 were studying in various technical schools. In all of North Vietnam prior to the ceasefire there had been only two university graduates among the minorities. In the 1961-62 school year there were 378 minority students at Hanoi University and 125 more studying in the Soviet Union. Eighty-one students, including four women, had graduated from universities as engineers, doctors, and pharmacists. So there was no real reason for the Vice-Minister of Education to feel too downcast. But he was not measuring progress by either the past or the South.

At the Central Committee for National Minorities, Vice-President Duong Cong Hoat of the Tay minority, a quiet-spoken, slim man with a gentle demeanor that masked deep undercurrents of energy, put some of the problems in perspective.

"Take the Lolos for example," he said. "They had taken a vow never to study, never to leave their villages to work anywhere else. There was an economic reason for this attitude. The Lolo live on the mountain summits. They were slaves of the Tay — my people. In fact the Tays and Lolos were both slaves, but in differing degree, of the Tay seigneurs. All the land, all the animals in the forest and fish in the streams belonged to the seigneurs. Part of anything a Tay grew or part of anything a Lolo hunted or fished belonged to the seigneurs. But the hunters and fishermen for the most part were the Lolo. They brought their tribute down from the mountains or had to have it available on demand. The seigneurs had every interest in keeping them there to continue paying tribute. So it was they who spread the dogma that the Lolos should never leave their villages, should never study. This was a problem we had to face.

"We first attracted a handful of courageous ones and after giving them just a bit of education, we sent them back to their villages for a visit. 'You see,' they said to their elders. 'We've been studying a bit. We're not dead. There's nothing so terrible about it.' Then they would return and we would give them a simple administrative job for a while.

Back again to the village: 'I've been working in an office. You see — I'm alright.' Gradually they got a taste for study and working outside their own villages. The pioneers attracted others and now Lolos are as keen as any other minority on study and on seeing the world outside their own mountain tops. In that way, too, we were able to train teachers to go back into the Lolo villages and give them a start in education.

"Another problem we had to face was the age-old mutual suspicions between the peoples of the mountains and the Delta, the minorities and the Khins. This was dealt with in many ways. They came together at work sites, building the new roads that were pushed through in the minority areas, on state farms and co-ops. Our Committee started organizing visits of delegations to Hanoi and the Delta. They would come and look at such things as factories for cigarettes and matches and see that the townspeople labor for things the minorities need. They would visit a plywood plant and see what valuable things could be made from the trees they were used to burning down to clear their hillside cultivation plots.

They are always greatly astonished to see trees being converted into useful things in front of their eyes. We show them the Nam Dinh textile mill and they see it not only works for the Khins but that Khins put aside part of the production for just the sort of textiles the minorities need for their national costumes.

"The most impressive thing is the salt plant. Salt is such an important item for the minorities that they consider it as medicine. It was used as a bribe by the French and now is so used by Diem — if you kill or capture a Vietminh or Viet Cong, so many pounds of salt. If a village is rebellious, cut its salt supplies first thing. They tried to make policies with salt. At the plant our minority people see how plentiful salt is for the Delta people and that it could be produced to sell at four sou a pound, but in fact they pay eight sou in order that the minority people can buy it at the same price despite the great transport costs. They never stop talking about this in the villages. The Delta people were subsidizing their salt — a terrifically impressive thing.

"In their visits to Hanoi and other cities, they see how friendly disposed people are towards them. In the past if they came to the capital, they were despised as third-rate people. They were insulted, often beaten up and chased like dogs. Now they really feel they are members of one big family."

Concerning the proportion of farms in cooperatives, it is about the same in all the minority areas as elsewhere, that is, an average of 80 percent. In the valleys the figure was 100 percent, but progressively less as one advanced towards the mountain summits. One fifth of the co-ops were of the higher type, where all the land is pooled and payment is exclusively based on labor contributed. Duong Cong Hoat pointed to the steady rise in incomes, reckoned in pounds of rice per person. Before Liberation, the annual average was 330 pounds of rice per head, but by 1956 it had gone up to 836 pounds, and for the past three years it has fluctuated at around 1,000 pounds. Even

more impressive, is the figure for areas like Dien Bien Phu, where the co-ops were set up early, an average of 2,000 to 2,500 pounds of rice. Famine conditions have completely disappeared in the valleys, and are almost liquidated in the mountains. The days when minority peoples had to subsist on roots and bark for several months a year are gone.

I asked if there was any alternative to the wasteful "ray" cultivation method of burning a different patch of forest every year for hillside paddy or maize and not using the same patch a second time till ten or more years had passed. The Vice — Chairman replied that zones had been established where it was forbidden to burn the forest, and steps had been taken to select the "ray" in rotation so that the best land could be had with the least damage to timber.

"There were all sorts of suspicions to be overcome," he explained. "For instance, the Man minority, before they go to plant a 'ray,' will poke a hole in the ground with a stick and drop in a dozen grains of rice. If they find them disturbed after a few days, or eaten, then there are evil spirits around and another 'ray' must be cleared. Very wasteful. They have another terrible habit. Every Man must celebrate his or her birthday just once in their life. On the selected day, all the domestic animals are killed by cutting their throats, from the buffalo down to the last chicken. Only after one month, can they start stocking up again. But as for the 'ray', there are now plenty of virgin lands lower down the slopes which we help them clear, and they begin using buffalo and ploughs instead of ax and fire, and instead of holes poked in the ground. There are big demands on manpower on the state farms and on construction sites and many of the younger people from the mountains prefer this to old-fashioned 'ray' cultivation. There are also big possibilities opening up for the mountain people to raise cattle, at which they are very expert, and to grow industrial crops which don't need annual re-planting. When we can solve production and distribution of the foodstuffs they need, then the 'ray' will die a natural death."

Some other superstitions harmful to production, even to public health, were explained to me by Hoang No, a Thai member of the Administrative Committee of the Thai-Meo autonomous zone, when I visited its capital of Son La. "In general," he said, "the influence of the sorcerers and geomancers was very strong. They were consulted on everything, from sickness to propitious days for planting rice, building a house or anything else. If anyone fell ill, the sorcerer lays down what sort of animal — even how many — must be sacrificed, according to his estimate of the gravity of the illness. It was very good for him — he got the best parts — but bad for the patient and for live-stock raising."

I asked him about a curious custom among the Thai, still prevalent when I had visited the region six years previously. Before a young man could marry his betrothed, he lived with her family for anything up to six or seven years and had to prove his worth in the fields. After years of unpaid labor — and unrewarded love — he might be packed off

home as "unsuitable." During those years, he could not touch his bride-perhaps-to-be, although he might have the sour reflection of hearing her amusing herself with a lover, while he slept out on the verandah. Hoang No laughed:

"The Vietnamese call that 'eating cold rice and sleeping out of doors'," he said. "But that's ended now. In theory it's completely finished. But in some of the remoter regions, the parents insist that the young man serves at least for one year — or sends a buffalo instead. But in 90 percent of cases now the young people make a free choice. They may set up house on their own, but it is more usual for the bride to go and live with her husband's family. Even if he goes to live with her people, it is as her husband — and no more unpaid labor. Forming the co-ops dealt the last blow to that. It was one of the most pernicious customs of our people, the thing that weighed most heavily on every young man, obviously a form of slavery.

"With the Meo too," he explained, "marriage of 14-year-old boys to girls of 20 and more has also almost died out in the past few years — and a very good thing too.

For the Thai and Lao Lum valley-dwellers, the situation was different. There were no tigers to stalk as hunters; no tribal feuds to pursue as warriors. They had no excuse not to do field work. There was plenty of land to be had. Apart from the paddy fields in the valleys, anyone could help himself to as much hillside land as he could cultivate. It was manpower that counted more than land ownership. So among the valley-dwellers, it was the girl babies who were prized — as future bait for manpower.

"How are the cooperatives going?" I asked. "Wasn't it a curious innovation for the minority peoples with all their old customs? What happened to the landlords?"

"There were no landlords, as such, in the minority areas," he replied. "Here we had a fundamentally feudal society, almost primitive feudalism if compared to the Delta. There it was the landlords who exploited the peasants by land rent; here it was the labor and fruit of the labor of the minority peoples that was exploited by the seigneurs. The latter in theory owned all the lands and forests, all the mountains and valleys, the animals in the jungle, and the fish in the rivers. The seigneurs distributed the land for administrative reasons only. Notables got larger amounts to cultivate, peasants smaller amounts of the rich valley lands. As for the mountain slopes you could cultivate as much as you liked. But land was not transformed into private property. Each peasant had to pay tribute in labor to the notables, in produce or money taxes to the seigneurs; hunters had to give up part of the animals they hunted or fish they caught. Anyone had to contribute unpaid labor any time a seigneur or even a notable wanted to build a house. Girls could be taken off as house-servants as long as the seigneurs wanted them — all their lives even.

"After Liberation the seigneurs by and large disappeared. Many of them fled with the French. Others were deprived of their feudal rights. Land was distributed more equitably for cultivation, without distinction of class. But we did not know enough about

conditions to make any big changes. We did not want to disturb the situation too much until we knew it better.

"The government moved very carefully. We did not want any repetition of mistakes made during land reform in the Delta [where there were numerous cases of wrong classification of rich peasants, landlords, etc., and many people were unjustly punished]. We adopted the policy that in measures applied to the minority areas, specific characteristics must be taken into consideration. The line decided on was not that of 'land revolution' but of 'democratic transformation' aimed at ending feudal relations and creating the cooperatives at the same time. It was perhaps more a political task than an economic one. Formation of cooperatives was easy — much easier than in the Delta. There was no private land ownership; there was a strong tradition of communal work in the fields. But had we just formed co-ops and not carried out political education at the same time, the remaining seigneurs and notables would have retained their old influence. It could not have been otherwise. The vestiges of feudal relations were still strong. They would have dominated the coops and ruined everything. So we carried out explanations, aroused the peoples' political consciousness.

"First we had to differentiate between the valley and mountain regions. The class distinctions were clearer in the valleys; there were seigneurs, and notables, rich peasants, poor peasants. In the higher regions, there were mainly working peasants or hunters and a sort of aristocracy. Some of the latter did work or hunt a little — but in general they lived off the labor of others. The aim of the explanations, carried out mainly by the politically more advanced people in the villages themselves during work in the fields or at village meetings, was to make clear the different roles in the past of peasants and seigneurs; who were the exploiters and who the exploited; what was good and what was bad; that the real 'aristocracy' is the people, those who produce by the labor of their hands and because of this the peasants are now masters of the countryside. There were no 'accusation meetings' against the seigneurs and notables as against the landlords in the Delta. There were no executions. Only in a handful of cases where a seigneur or notable tried to organize armed bands to prevent explanation meetings, were any arrests made.

"Policy was expressed in five principles: 'to be gentle, firm, simple, systematic, and thorough.' These had to go together like the two wings of a bird in flight. If one failed the bird would fall. If we neglected one of these aspects, our program would fall. So towards the peasants the attitude was gentle and simple; towards the exploiters the attitude was firm; education was systematic and thorough. Because of this, democratic transformation and formation of the co-ops went smoothly, hand-in-hand — a peaceful transformation of the countryside which yielded excellent results. The main part of this movement was carried out early in 1961. As far as the valley people is concerned, they have taken to cooperatives as a young eagle takes to the air."

Another important point made by Hoang No was that the political education had wiped out any remnants of traditional hostilities among the minorities themselves and also between minorities and Vietnamese. "Had the minorities been hostile to the Delta people as in the old days," he pointed out, "the large-scale migration to the state farms, opening up the virgin lands, and so on, would have been impossible. You can travel from one end of the Zone to the other [which indeed, I had done] and you'll find nothing but the friendliest relations everywhere."

This was obviously true, you could see it in the market places, in the fields, at the roadside construction sites, everywhere. Vietnamese, Thais, Meos, Mans, and a score of other nationalities worked together in admirable harmony; not only in the Zone, but in lots of other places I visited. Vietnamese were obviously welcome guests in the Autonomous Zones, because the migrants brought with them everything from help in education and public health and improved agricultural techniques to a ready market for the typical products of the minority regions.

The minority peoples I saw visiting Hanoi always attracted much attention in the streets with their beautiful and varied costumes, their silver ornaments and embroidered bags. People seemed to go out of their way to make them feel like relatives on a welcome visit. They certainly gave every appearance of feeling perfectly at home whether in Hanoi or among their own lovely valleys and mountains.

I found the situation the same in the Viet-Bac Autonomous Zone where I travelled widely and talked, among others, with Chu Quoc Hung, a battle-toughened, life-long revolutionary from the Nung minority. His brother, General Chu Van Tan, a famous veteran of the VPA and a member of the Political Bureau of the Lao Dong party, is president of the Zone. Chu Quoc Hung is president of the Administrative Committee of Thai Nguyen province, the capital of which, with the same name, is also capital of the Zone. The Viet-Bac is the cradle of the Vietnamese revolution and it is here that 72 percent of administrative posts are held by the minorities, a handsome recognition of the unswerving support of the Viet-Bac minority peoples for the war of resistance, the protection they gave to the revolutionary bases from which the whole war was directed.

The U.S. State department might take note: Promises of autonomy for minority peoples have not been forgotten in North Vietnam. They have been fulfilled with a respect for human dignity and real freedom that the U.S. government would do well to apply to minorities within its own frontiers — not to mention in South Vietnam. Promises to establish racial equality in South Vietnam and to set up Autonomous Zones for the minority peoples there are included in the program of the National Liberation Front and will certainly be fulfilled — perhaps long before the authors of the "Blue Book" can imagine. The inclusion, among five elected vice-presidents of the NLF, of Ybih Aleo, representing the minorities of the *Hants Plateaux*, and of Dai Due Son Vong, representing the Khmer Krom, is an additional guarantee of this. The policy of racial

equality is already being applied in those areas where, despite the worst the U.S.-Diem armed forces could do, the Rhade, Jarai, Bhanar, and a score of other ethnic groups are living in freedom in their own liberated zones.

South Vietnam will also have its own Autonomous Zones for its long-suffering minorities.

CHAPTER VII: BACK TO DIEN BIEN PHU

A Lesson to Ponder

The road to Dien Bien Phu is one of Asia's great scenic highways. From Hanoi, it snakes its way for 300-odd miles through jungle-covered mountains, over passes up to 5,000 feet. For scores of miles on end in the spring of 1962, it was like driving through some magnificent botanical park — with a dash of zoological garden thrown in. Trees were ablaze with scarlet, golden, and white blossoms — vivid and stark against the jungle green. In the early mornings there was the sensuous perfume of jungle flowers in the air, the restless purple contours of endless folds of wild mountain ranges, the piping, joyous cry of baboons leaping around in giant bamboo thickets; the swift blue flash of a kingfisher.

Rice-filled valleys, broad at the bottom where some placid stream carved a path through the green, followed the road up the mountains, rice fields fitting neatly into each other until they ended in a sharp arrowhead only a few square — more correctly triangular — yards in size, where the valley ended in the blank face of a mountain ridge or left the road behind in a breathlessly steep gradient. From the top, one could look back and forward over a harmonious mosaic of fields fanning out from the tiny triangles — each piece of mirrored rice field fitting into another as if set by a master jeweller. The curved walls of the descending terraces, the delicate green brush strokes of freshly planted rice against the polished copper surface of the water-filled fields blending into one of the most satisfying of panoramas. Always in a dramatic setting of mountain and forest, a glistening stream the vital center of it all. Nature tamed and embellished, set in the compelling drama of nature in the raw — calm and powerful.

Passing through the rebuilt towns and villages — most of them in ruins when I had last driven over this road eight years ago — I thought at first that only the mountains remained unchanged. But after I had arrived at Moc Chau, about 120 miles west of Hanoi, I had to change my mind. Thousands of acres of what had been dense, jungle-covered mountains before, were now fertile clearings with the green of rice, sweet potatoes, peanuts, and other crops showing through. New villages were springing up in clearings freshly hacked out of the jungle.

My mind went back to the first time I had travelled this road. Stretched in either direction as far as the eye could see from any of the innumerable mountain passes was what looked like a parade of fire-flies, a string of flashing diamonds flung carelessly over the mountain contours, sparkling and winking in the jet black night. As they approached, you could see they were blobs of dancing, wavering flames seemingly hanging in the air, advancing, overtaking, receding until they were mere pin-points of light that winked out

altogether. One had to be close to see that they were flaming bamboo torches held in the hand of every tenth man or woman in an unending line of porters, each with upwards of a 100-pound load on his or her back, or lighting the road for a long convoy of bicycles, each with up to 600 pounds of supplies aboard — bound for Dien Bien Phu. Before one torch spluttered out, another was lit for it from the abundant bamboo lining the road. They were as much to scare away panthers and tigers as to light the roads — tigers' appetites having been whetted for human flesh by previous years of feasting on Vietnam's battlefields.

Convoys of ox-carts, wheel-barrows, bicycles, stout human backs occasionally were passed by a truck convoy, headlights creating mysterious shadow effects in the jungle. In the latter stages of the journey, especially the last terrible 50 miles from Tuan Giao over incredibly steep mountains to Dien Bien Phu, it was more often the bicycle and foot convoys that passed the trucks. They averaged 15 miles a night, while the best the truck convoys could average was ten miles — what with breakdowns, bomb craters, delayed action bombs on the road, and other obstacles.

No text book of logistics has ever tabulated the number and proportions of bicycles, human backs, wheel-barrows, ponies, and ox-carts necessary to transport the needs of a modern army. But in General Vo Nguyen Giap's planning, all that had to be carefully calculated. The numbers needed, the weights they could carry, the number of miles each category could cover in a night in order that by a fixed date the necessary quantities of food and munitions would be amassed in order to start the action. All this had to be foreseen, and also that supplies would continue to arrive in sufficient quantities to feed the voracious appetite of a military machine capable of combating the superior technical means, the weight of arms available to the French.

The latter, for a long time, were unaware that anything was going on at all. Roads were silent, or seemingly nonexistent, during the daytime. The French, despite their unchallenged monopoly of the air and their daily reconnaissance flights, did not even know that the last hundred miles or so of road had been built. Work had been done at night by the light of bamboo fires spaced every ten meters or so along the track. Before the road-builders left work in the morning for their shelters tunneled into mountain or ravine walls, they covered their work with freshly cut bamboo and tree branches to hide what was going on from prying French planes.

General Giap, years later in his book, *People's War — People's Army* (Hanoi, 1961), wrote as follows about the Dien Bien Phu road:

> Truck convoys valiantly crossed streams, mountains and forests; drivers spent scores of sleepless nights in defiance of difficulties and dangers, to bring food and ammunition to the front...

> Thousands of bicycles from the towns also carried food and munitions to the front. Hundreds of sampans of all sizes, hundreds of thousands of bamboo rafts crossed rapids and cascades to supply the front.
>
> Convoys of pack-horses from the Meo highlands or the provinces headed for the front. Day and night, hundreds and thousands of porters and young volunteers crossed passes and forded rivers in spite of enemy planes and delayed-action bombs.
>
> Near the firing line supply operations had to be carried out uninterruptedly and in the shortest possible time. Cooking, medical work, transport, etc., was carried out right in the trenches, under enemy bombing and cross-fire.
>
> Such was the situation at Dien Bien Phu... Never had so many young Vietnamese travelled so far and become acquainted with so many distant regions of the country. From the plains to the mountains, on roads and jungle trails, on rivers and streams — everywhere there was the same animation. (Pp. 185-84.)

I had experienced some of this during my first visit to Vietnam at the beginning of the historic battle. It was impossible not to recall those momentous days — mainly nights as far as my travels were concerned.

The last stretch from Tuan Giao to Dien Bien Phu is today still a hair-raising experience. Apart from sections where a new wide road is being built with respectable gradients and proper bridges, it is still the narrow, deep-rutted, incredibly steep winding track, as it was hacked out of the mountain sides at the time. Only vehicles with front wheel drives and extra low gears could attempt it. For almost 50 miles, it is a series of ascending and descending corkscrew spirals. Bridges are often enough squared-off tree trunks, precisely the width of double wheels and spanning fearfully deep ravines. You hang on with your teeth as the vehicle groans in the lowest of low gears and lurches up and around in what seem near vertical spiral turns, or plunges into a rushing torrent with water foaming around your ankles and you feel the car carried sideways downstream towards a thundering waterfall as pebbles slither away under the tires from the furious onslaught of water. Only the knowledge that the supplies did get through comforts the traveller at such moments. But for every mile of road, the view is magnificent, successive panoramas opening out at every hairpin turn, each with some special feature of its own. Eventually you clear that last ridge and the smiling valley of Dien Bien Phu is at your feet.

What a change from last time. Bomb and shell craters had been levelled, the spider web of trenches which crept every night towards General de Castries's headquarters had been filled in and, to supplement human intervention, tropical growth — bananas and bamboo for the most part — had covered up the other scars.

Appropriately enough my arrival at the reception house coincided with a tremendous thunder storm. As the sun went down in purple fury, successive blasts of thunder

crashed and rolled over the folds of surrounding mountains, forked lightning lit up the dramatic beauty of the scene. It was a realistic flashback to what had been going on just eight years previously as the battle roared to its climax. The boom of thunder and flash of lightning were supplemented by splashes of fire on the mountain sides where Delta immigrants were burning felled forest for a new farm. The illusion of a great battle raging was almost complete.

I recalled having asked Ho Chi Minh at his jungle headquarters in late March, 1954: What was Dien Bien Phu? The name had been mentioned several times in French communiques I heard on my portable radio on the way to Vietnam

"This is Dien Bien Phu," said President Ho as he tipped his sun helmet upside down on the bamboo table. "Here are mountains," and his slim, strong fingers ran around the outer rim of the helmet, "and that's where we are." Then his hand plunged down into the bottom of the helmet: "Down there is the valley of Dien Bien Phu — that's where the French are. The best troops they have in Indo-China. They will never get out. It may take some time, but they will never get out."

"That sounds like an Indo-China Stalingrad!" I said.

"In relation to conditions here, yes. In a modest way it is something like that," he agreed.

This bottom of President Ho's sun-helmet is the largest of the Thai valleys, 15 miles long and up to five miles in width. The battle which sealed the fate of the French in Indo-China lasted 55 days and was waged by gradually wrapping up French positions in a spider-web system of trenches, dug at night under artillery and machine-gun fire, defended by day from aerial bombing and counter-attacks, inexorably creeping nearer French positions until they cut the valley in two and closed in to bring the troops that dug them within a few yards of General de Castries's headquarters on May 8, 1954. It was a unique battle with no parallel in history for the original means with which it was fought; a victory for troops of infinitely superior morale defending their own soil from the foreign invader.

On a knoll overlooking the main part of the battlefield today, stands a shattered U.S. Sherman tank and five or six paces away the tombstones of two unknown heroes, buried on the spot from which they hurled grenades that destroyed the tank and themselves. The tank, one of ten the French managed to get into the valley before the encirclement cut them off from such heavy supplies, has been provided with a rough shelter. It stands there, its blackened tracks burst asunder where the grenades exploded; its cannon dropped limply forward like a broken nose, a monument to man's superiority over machines. The Vietnamese people won their war against the French without a single tank or plane.

Further down the valley, not far from de Castries's bunker headquarters, another museum piece has been kept. A 155mm U.S. artillery piece has been set back on its

concrete emplacements, its stubby, arrogant barrel pointing now at the blue line of hills from which the liberators came. Around it is the debris of dozens of other artillery pieces and many thousands of shell cases. The French colonel in charge of artillery had promised to smash within 20 minutes any Vietnam attack with his artillery. The attack came, the artillery fired, but two key positions fell. And VPA artillery — which the French never dreamed could have been transported over those terrifying mountains — opened up to put the vital airstrips out of action. The colonel shot himself!

In a small museum at the head of the valley some relics of the battle and events connected with it have been preserved. It might be a good thing for General Harkins, who heads the U.S. military command in Saigon, to have a look at the museum and ponder over the significance of the tank and the artillery pieces. In the museum, he could see a photo of one of his predecessors in Saigon, a U.S. military officer named O'Daniel, touring Dien Bien Phu positions in an open jeep with General — then Colonel — de Castries; both with smiles of supreme confidence on their faces, the sort of smile General Harkins presents today to the Saigon photographers. The picture was taken just six weeks before the battle started. He could see a fantastic collection of weapons, many of them from primitive jungle arsenals, such as now provide the partisans in South Vietnam with the weapons they use to defend their homes and in raids to secure more efficient American arms. They were used by guerillas at Dien Bien Phu to prevent break-out escape attempts or break-in rescue efforts. Both such attempts were made. Both were stopped dead in their tracks.

The museum is a monument to the ingenuity which comes with a people's war — from home-made bazookas and fearsome bombards to bamboo replacements of steel leaves for broken springs of the truck convoys. Along the valley, tranquil and beautiful now, General Harkins could see the debris of U.S. transport and bomber planes — all a sorry reminder of the impotence of U.S. intervention to save French colonialism from its crushing defeat at the hands of the Vietnamese people.

France sent its most illustrious generals and marshals to the Indo-China war. One after another they lost their reputations or their lives, sometimes both. Some of those who survived, like General Raoul Salan, seemed to have learned nothing. Salan's passion for killing was such that he was willing to turn his military skills against his own people when they demanded an end to the colonial war he and others waged in Algeria after the Indo-China defeat.

The Pentagon generals seem bent on following the same road. They seem to think they can do better with Dictator Diem than the French did with Emperor Bao Dai, plus U.S. support. The debris of U.S. planes, tanks, and artillery pieces in Dien Bien Phu valley should be sufficient warning as to what lies at the end of the road. America may have more generals than the French whose lives or reputations — or both — are expendable.

The end result will be the same. They do not have enough to force the Vietnamese people to their knees.

President Kennedy himself would do well to ponder on the advice General de Gaulle is said to have given him, before he embarked the United States in the South Vietnam adventure. According to the well-informed Parisian daily, *Le Monde* of May 31, 1962, when Kennedy the previous year revealed to de Gaulle his intention of intervening in South Vietnam, the President of France replied: 'For seven years we wasted our time there. If you want to get bogged down in that one — go ahead." *Le Monde* correspondent Andre Fontaine added: "It is significant in this connection that of the European members of SEATO, France alone has refused Thailand . . . the symbolic contingent that it demands." France indeed acted according to the well-known English adage, "Once bitten, twice shy."

A modest war memorial, designed to harmonize with the contours of the hills behind, with its serried ranks of tombstones is a somber reminder of the price the Vietnamese people paid for the victory. The simple inscription, "A Grateful Fatherland," is in keeping with the modesty and grief of the monument.

Toward Another Dien Bien Phu

When Homer Bigart returned to the United States after his forced withdrawal from Vietnam, he published a long summary article (*New York Times*, July 25, 1962) entitled, "Vietnam Victory Remote Despite U.S. Aid to Diem." The title speaks for itself. Its tone is glum and gloomy. Victory is remote, wrote Bigart, because "the Vietnamese President seems incapable of winning the loyalty of his people." Yet, he says, "Washington insists there is no alternative to President Ngo Dinh Diem." And he makes clear that the piling up of arms and new military doctrines cannot win this war against the people. There is no lack of military means:

> ... In 1963 [he writes], the Republic of South Vietnam will put well-equipped forces totalling more than 350,000 men against 25,000 guerillas who have no artillery, no anti-aircraft guns, no air power, no trucks, no jeeps, no prime movers and only basic infantry weapons. Also by 196S the Vietnamese armed forces should be adequately staffed with officers and noncoms... will have more helicopters, more personnel carriers and other gadgets to enhance mobility; more sentry dogs to sniff out hiding guerillas, more plastic boats for the delta region, more American advisers, new tactical doctrines...

To illustrate his point, Bigart describes an action in which guerillas wiped out a convoy only 37 miles north of Saigon, killing two U.S. officers:

> This episode was a bitter revelation for Americans. The ambush occurred on the outskirts of Bentre [Ben Tre], a garrison town and on a heavily travelled highway.

> Yet the guerillas moved into position in daylight, prepared the ambuscade in full view of the road and waited for three hours for the convoy to appear. They must have been observed by scores of peasants. Yet no one informed the garrison in Bentre. Could this have happened if peasants felt any real identification with the regime?

He warns American readers not to believe the optimistic figures put out by the U.S. Defense Department that casualties were running five to three in favor of the South Vietnam government forces. "Generally," he says, "Communist guerillas are indistinguishable from peasants. Thus many of the 'enemy' dead reported by the South Vietnam Government were ordinary peasants shot down because they fled from the villages as the troops entered... running away because they did not want to be rounded up for military conscription or forced labor."

Nor does Bigart believe that gadgets or war dogs will win the war. Most of the German shepherds are sick, and besides "someone discovered that each dog required $1.20 of frozen horse meat a day" while "a Vietnamese soldier gets by on 19 cents worth of rice." Neither does he have much faith in the experiments for which South Vietnam is the proving ground, like the following: "On the central plateau for example, David Nuttle, a civilian attached to United States Special Forces, is experimenting with a poisonous shrub called kpung. Its leaves have nettles that cause excruciating pain that lasts a week. Mr. Nuttle proposes a double border of kpung around the strategic hamlets to keep the Viet Cong out."

The conclusion of Bigart at the end of almost a full page of acid observations ought to be well pondered over by State Department and Pentagon.

> No one who has seen conditions of combat in South Vietnam would expect conventionally-trained United States forces to fight any better against Communist guerillas than did the French in their seven years of costly and futile warfare. For despite all the talk here of training men for jungle fighting, of creating counter-guerillas who can exist in forests and swamps and hunt down the Viet Cong, Americans may simply lack the endurance — and the motivation — to meet the unbelievably tough demands of jungle fighting.

Obviously "motivation" is a key word here. American and Diemist troops do not know why they are fighting, and if they do, they do not believe in the motives. Planes and tanks, dogs and dollars, poison hedges and barbed wire are useless when the people are on the other side.

Some facts to which Bigart could not have access from the U.S.-Diem authorities in Saigon, who dealt only in "victories" were furnished me by Nguyen Van Hieu, following his visit to the Conference on World Disarmament and Peace held in Moscow in July 1962. He had come straight from the battle front in South Vietnam and had some interesting figures. In the first six months of 1962, 16,000 Diemist troops had been put

out of action and 15,000 had deserted to the National Liberation Front with arms and equipment. Perhaps even more important for its long-range implications, over 12 million people had taken part in various mass demonstrations against the Diem regime and U.S. intervention.

The French were not the first, and Bigart is not the last, to discover that war against the people in Vietnam or anywhere else has no future.

CHAPTER VIII: NORTH LOOKS SOUTH

From Soldiering to Farming

It was a relief to leave the relics of war behind and visit a big state farm that now cultivates most of the former battlefield of Dien Bien Phu. It was fascinating to discover that most of the workers were from a demobilized regiment that had taken part in the battle.

"We started literally from nothing," said farm manager, Pham Ngoc Khanh, a lithe, bronzed former battalion commander of the 176th regiment of the VPA. "In April, 1958, our regiment was ordered by the Defense Ministry to return to Dien Bien Phu and start farming. The valley had to be turned into a food silo for the Northwest. So we marched back — all the way on foot — from the Delta, and started work"

He said that soldiers were needed for it was a frontier area still heavily mined and de-mining the fields was soldier's work. "We came with our military equipment," Pham continued, "but no farm implements." Although many of the men objected to being shifted from soldiering to farming, when the importance of their task to the national economy was explained, they soon settled down and later really became enthusiastic over their work. To get crops the first season, no time could be spent in building houses or waiting for farm equipment. Fortunately, the local Thai people were hospitable and let the new farmers bunk in with them. There was no lack of shell cases to be pounded into hoes and spades. Mines were a terrible problem; in the first year eight men were wounded in the fields and with deep plowing the toll will be heavier, Pham Ngoc Khanh told me.

"The first season, after two months back-breaking, hand-blistering work," he recalled, "we managed to get 600 acres sown to rice, every acre of it broken by hand. We didn't even have enough seed, but the locals helped us out: 'You chased the enemy away,' they said. 'You're clearing the mines away. The least we can do is give you some seed. You can pay us back later.' Which of course we did. After the first season we built houses, the government sent us tractors and other implements, and things went easier."

When I was there in 1962, the ex-soldiers had 5,000 acres under cultivation including coffee, cotton, and sugar cane — all new crops for this area. As we toured the state farm, the ex-battalion commander identified various landmarks of the battle of Dien Bien Phu. The "southern airfield" was under rice, and the sugar cane section is farmed by the same 2nd company of the 970th battalion which took the area from the French.

I remarked that the young women in the fields all looked like film stars and that in general I had never seen such fine-looking Vietnamese girls as on the various farms and construction projects along the road to Dien Bien Phu — with color in their cheeks, milk-

white teeth and ready smiles. Almost all of them were migrants from the Delta, a fair sprinkling from Hanoi itself. The drab, chocolate-colored dresses, almost a uniform in the Delta, had practically disappeared in favor of blouses of white, green, pink, blue and other pastel shades and loose black silk or cotton trousers.

"It's true," he agreed. "The climate favors them in the Northwest. But it's not only the good air and more plentiful food on the farms. It's also the break with old feudal, social pressures that inevitably still exist in the older parts of the country. The first thing a girl does when she arrives is to clean the black lacquer off her teeth. Gleaming white teeth are now considered beautiful, not polished black ones. She lets her hair flow free instead of rolling it up in a tight turban. Brighter clothes come next, blouses no longer buttoned up tight around the throat."

I suspected that competition from the attractively-dressed, graceful Thai women also had something to do with abandoning the drab, chocolate cottons. But in general, at Diem Bien Phu and along the road, one had the impression of young people, free and unrestrained, plunging into a future with a confidence they themselves had won. The new farms and migrant workers breathing a spirit of exuberant youth with all its ardor and energy, freed from colonial and local feudal fetters.

"Why did you come to Dien Bien Phu?" I asked one of the dazzling beauties hoeing the sugar-cane. "The glory of the name itself attracted me," she said. She had been a schoolteacher in Hanoi. How did she feel so far from home? She waved her hoe at the feathery grace of the bamboo copse, the blue mountains that completely enclose the valley: "Who wouldn't love it here?" she said. "It's simply beautiful. There's plenty of room here. The air is wonderful. We are all one family of young people. There's plenty of work. It's as healthy and satisfying a life as you could wish for." Wasn't it a waste of talent to be hoeing sugar-cane when she was qualified as a schoolteacher?

"No," she replied. "Half my time I teach. The rest, I work in the fields. I could teach full-time if I wanted. But I love being out in the fields, close to nature. I've never felt so useful in my life."

For the first couple of years, the 1,500 regimental troops did the pioneer work and cleared the mines in soldierly, bachelor solitude. Then they were joined by 1,200 volunteers from the Delta, all but 300 of them women. For many of the bachelor troops, their problems were solved. Marriages were celebrated thick and fast. The farm now has a splendid crop of 1,200 babies. Each of the farm's 14 sections has a scrupulously clean creche filled with fat, rosy babies — all under two years of age. The farm has a 60-bed hospital where obviously the main clients are mothers and mothers-to-be.

I asked the farm manager whether there was any friction between the newcomers and the Thai and other minority peoples. His answer was no, except for some difficulty created by wandering Thai water buffalo playing havoc with the crops. This was solved by setting up fences with the barbed wire that the French had left behind in such

profusion. The Delta people have gained the friendship of the Thai by teaching them the two-crop method which doubled their income and by creating a small local pottery industry which saved the Thai from having to make the 120-mile journey to Son La, which in the past was their closest available source of rice-cooking pots. Education and public health were introduced, together with fertilizer and new techniques.

From Lo Van Hac, an energetic figure with the good looks of the Thai race to which he belongs, and Chairman of the Administrative Committee of Dien Bien Phu, I learned that 28,000 people lived in the valley and surrounding mountains, not including the state farm. Of them, 1,089 were Khins (Vietnamese), the rest split up among a dozen minority groups. By far the most numerous were the Thai (16,000), followed by the Meo (almost 5,000). Altogether there were 4,400 families of which 3,500 worked together in 135 agriculture cooperatives. The Thais, as valley rice-growers, were virtually all in co-ops; the Meo, cattle-raisers, hunters, and "ray" cultivators, dispersed on the mountain summits, had not the same material or organizational interest. Of their 920 families, only 140 had entered co-ops.

Next day the road led back over the mountains again towards the Delta, along valleys where majestically broad, green-felted steps led up to the threshold of flower-bedecked villages and on and up in an ever-narrowing bronze and green staircase till the terraced fields were pinched off at the sky-line. One day tourists will come from all over the world to rejoice in the beauties of the road to Dien Bien Phu. They will also come from south of the 17th parallel to pay homage to those who fought and died for all Vietnamese.

For Love of My Tho

Among various facts and figures given me by the chief of Nam Dinh province in North Vietnam was that of cinema attendance for 1961. For a population of 1,100,000, there had been a cinema attendance of 3,260,000 — a figure he quoted as evidence of rising living standards.

And then I stumbled on an interesting fact: "One of the mobile cinemas is especially popular," the provincial chief said. "A single person will buy up to 30 tickets for one showing." At my astonishment, he continued, "People say the extra tickets are for love of My Tho'. You see, every province and town in the North has 'adopted' a province and town in the South. We put something by for them to hand over after reunification. Our province had adopted My Tho province. The mobile cinema was bought from funds contributed by our people. It is called the 'My Tho' unit and it will be handed over at the moment of reunification, with whatever has been earned by its operation. It's the most popular unit in the province. We refloated the Kham San, a very nice river freighter that had been sunk in the Song Dao river. We have renamed it the 'My Tho' and it will also be handed over together with its profits. Factories and even small handicraft cooperatives

have all adopted some enterprise in the South and there will be really lots of things to hand over — when the day comes."

At Haiphong, the big industrial port and second city in North Vietnam, I found the same thing. It had "adopted" Tourane, a major port in Central Vietnam. A big coastal freighter formerly belonging to a private Chinese line had been refloated a few months previously and named "Da Nang," the Vietnamese name for Tourane, for later transfer there. A high school in Haiphong is named after a famous Tourane resistance hero. All the graduates from this school expect to work in Tourane after reunification. Also at Haiphong I found there were eight schools with a total of 3,900 pupils from the South, mostly children of regroupees but also a fair sprinkling sent by their parents at the time of the re-groupment in order to give them a socialist education. Another 1,000 were engaged in higher studies including 250 at universities and institutes in the socialist countries.

I visited School No. 4, a higher elementary school for girls. They left no doubt as to what they wanted — to study hard and put the fruits of their knowledge at the disposal of their people in the South as soon as possible. One eager, bright-eyed girl with the red scarf of a pioneer, said she wanted to become a doctor, "because after all the suffering in the South, they will need lots of doctors." A tall husky lass, whose home was just south of the demarcation line said she wanted to specialize in rice-growing: "We will have to build up the level of rice production in the South." Another from the same area wanted to be a teacher: "Education has been so shamefully neglected in the South. I want to study hard and be ready for reunification." Others wanted to be anything from cosmonauts to tractor drivers — the latter popular because of the big southern plains, very suitable for mechanized agriculture.

Children from the South got priority treatment, because of the enormous gap in educational levels between North and South and the urgent need there will be for specialists at the time of reunification.

The school itself seemed to be run on very down-to-earth lines with much emphasis on practical work. Although a girl's school, it had carpenter's shop and forge, and a small farm where new methods were being tried out for growing crops like maize and sugar cane suitable for the South. No one seemed to doubt for a moment that reunification would come. They were about as eager and enthusiastic a crowd of school children as I had ever seen. Teachers confirmed what was evident — that they studied with a very special elan, conscious of the extra call the southern part of the country would have on their services.

It was the same at a special school outside Hanoi for national minority people from the South, 1,300 of them there at the time of my visit. Four hundred others had already graduated and were attending technical and higher schools, 40 were at university and two who had graduated as doctors were continuing higher medical studies in the Soviet

Union. This is a tremendous thing for the minority peoples in general and those in the South in particular. Y Ngong, from the Rhade minority and director of the school, also a freshly-graduated doctor and very handsome in his red and black national costume, said that in 80 years of French rule not a single pupil from the national minorities had ever finished the 10th grade (Junior High School). "This is really a big thing that we have such a school here and later can graduate doctors, engineers, and teachers," he said. "Our adult population are not as developed as the Khins (Vietnamese) but our children will have the same level of education. With the teachers we are turning out, we will be able to have schools everywhere in our minority regions just as they have in the North now."

Although most of the pupils were children and young people, there were adults too. They attended special courses of general education, something impossible to acquire before and were looking forward to return to their villages, the vanguard of a minorities' intelligentsia.

Y Ngong remembered the many difficulties the school faced in teaching the 43 different nationalities a common tongue. Vietnamese. Many of the adults came to class armed with cross bows, poisoned arrows, and spears not yet feeling certain that no enemies were around. It took some time before they came without their arms, but now they sit in the classrooms, unarmed away from home the first time in their lives. Many came North to "study under President Ho," leaving their families behind, a real tribute to their faith in both President Ho and reunification from minority peoples whose family bonds are especially strong.

The school provided general education up to the 8th grade, supplementary studies for those who had finished 7th grade, in social services and natural sciences, teachers' training classes and a small class of political studies for those between the ages of 25 and 50. After the 8th grade, pupils with suitable qualifications could go on to ordinary Vietnamese schools and institutes for technical studies.

"Although we teach in Vietnamese here, each minority learns his own language so they can work in their own villages and districts," continued Y Ngong. "Most of the minorities here had no written language, but we are developing these as well. One of our main aims is to train teachers for secondary and higher schools, so they can start work immediately after reunification."

It is not only in training young people from the South as future specialists and teachers, or by "adopting" southern provinces and towns that North Vietnam looks towards the South. In long-range economic planning the needs of the whole country are taken into consideration — not just the needs of the North. The fact that there will be reunification on some basis or another before many years is an article of faith not only for children yearning to be reunited with their parents, husbands with their wives, but for government leaders and economic planners. There is no sign at any level of passive acceptance of the permanent division of the country. The right to reunification, the steps

to be taken to bring it about, are written into an international document signed by the great powers of East and West. The people of Vietnam from President Ho to a Jarai tribesman, who sends his child to study in Hanoi, expect that reunification will be brought about. Life in Vietnam is planned on that basis. Dean Rusk and Diem may have other ideas — as did Bidault and Bao Dai in their day. Bao Dai is a discredited monarch in exile; Bidault, at the time of writing, is a classified traitor in hiding. Both were thrown aside by history because they failed to understand the realities of history; they hung on too long to concepts rejected forever by the majority of mankind.

Industry for All Vietnam

For a glimpse into the future, I went to Thai Nguyen about 50 miles north of Hanoi. It was a collection of thatch-roofed adobe huts when I visited it five years previously. Now there were 300-feet-high stacks of coking furnaces pointing skywards, the profiles of blast furnaces etched against the horizon, convoys of ten-ton trucks trundled along with machine parts and pre-fab construction elements. Thai Nguyen was being converted into a great heavy industry center on an all-Vietnam scale. The sleepy township of Thai Nguyen in a few years would be an industrial city with a population of 120,000 and still expanding fast. And, another object lesson in contrast with the South, all the preliminary work had been done by elements of 80,000 army men, demobbed in the North in the previous few years.

On an area of over 10 square miles a big complex of buildings was going up to house blast furnaces, oxygen and power plants, steel rolling mills — all the components of a modern iron and steel plant. It would be the first on the Indo-China peninsula, with a capacity of 200,000 tons of pig iron and 200,000 tons of steel by 1965 with a gradual increased capacity up to an annual 1,000,000 tons of steel, enough to share with the South as soon as reunification made this practicable. My informant, Pham Tu Lang, vice-manager of the project and ex-colonel of the VPA, told me that an important problem is the lack of skilled labor, but that this problem is being solved by sending the best workers to the Soviet Union and China, as well as to Hanoi University, for training as engineers. Many of the Hanoi students do their practical work right on the job. The iron and steel combine is being built with Chinese aid and direction, and should employ 10,000 workers by 1965. The first pig iron plant was to go into production this year, 1962.

The giant combine is planned to meet the needs of both the North and the South for heavy industry.

"In building up this big combine," he said, "we are taking the needs of the whole country into account. This is in line with policy laid down at the Third Party Congress in September 1960 that 'the guiding principle must be to consolidate the socialist

revolution in the North and in so doing take the South into due consideration.' Priority goes to heavy industry and this has two aspects: to develop small scale industrial industries and power plants with small investments and quick returns; and to invest in long-range, large-scale plants for the future of all the country. The Thai Nguyen State Iron and Steel Combine is the largest of the second category investments."

As an example of how young people were adapting themselves quickly to industry, I had a talk with Do Thi Y a pretty and very lively girl from the Tay (sometimes called Tho) minority. Spick and span in her blue overalls she was critical and amused at the illiterate way I had written her name and that of her village. She decorated them with the indispensable accents before serious conversation could start. A few years previously she had been an illiterate minority girl, growing hillside paddy in a tiny hamlet, with her mother. She went to school for the first time after the ceasefire and a little over two years previously had got a job as cook's helper at the construction site. Soon she was promoted to the clinic as a "nurse." Bright and intelligent as any city girl, she was asked if she would like to have technical studies. "Of course I replied 'yes,'" she said. She and three other girls were packed off to a six month's course at the Hanoi Oxygen plant.

Although the machines and the oxygen flame frightened her at first, and she doubted her ability to master the oxygen compressor, she was back at the work site in six months and was considered to be an outstanding worker. She hopes to continue her studies, and is the apple of her mother's eye who constantly talks of her exploits back in her native village.

A city is being built not far from the works, to house 30,000 workers for a start and a total population of 90,000, linking up with the old Thai Nguyen township. Later it will be expanded to 120,000 to make it North Vietnam's third biggest city after Hanoi and Haiphong. A fitting reward for Thai Nguyen, the earliest resistance base in the long war of liberation.

Many other plants have been built up or expanded to cater to all-Vietnam needs. One is the modern machine-tool plant built at Hanoi with Soviet aid — the first in Indo-China. A large range of lathes, high precision milling, grinding, boring, and other machines are already in serial production there. Orders have been received from more industrially-advanced Asian countries like India for these high quality machine-tools. At present the biggest machines produced weigh less than two tons but the plant is being expanded to turn out ultra-modern multi-purpose monsters of up to 15 tons, of which only few Asian nations are capable.

Another machine-building plant expanded by Soviet aid is that at Campha, at the Hongay open-cast coal mine on the Baie d'Along. Originally a small shop to repair Hongay mine-machinery, it is now being re-equipped to produce spare parts for all types of mining machinery anywhere in the country — north or south of the 17th parallel. A

third machine-building plant — also financed with Soviet aid — will produce spare parts for thermal power stations. East Germany is helping the Haiphong Shipbuilding yards to produce coastal freighters of up to 1,000 tons by 1965, with provision for later expansion to build ocean-going ships up to 8,000 tons. Hungary is putting in an electrical-mechanical plant for various types of electric motors, transformers, and electronic-measuring instruments. All this falls within the policy of "socialist consolidation of the North with due consideration for the South."

In 1965, the Soviet Union will build a tractor plant and within a year or so after that, the girls at No. 4 Higher Elementary School will have more than realized their ambitions, by driving Vietnamese-made tractors. If reunification comes earlier, they will have to be content with Soviet, Rumanian, and other models for which spare parts, however, will be produced at a Soviet aid plant just north of Hanoi.

As for what had been achieved since the ceasefire and what was being planned, a few figures given me by Dong Viet Chau are illustrative:

	Maximum Output under French	*1961*	*1965 (planned)*
Coal (tons)	1,700,000	3,000,000	4,000,000
Cement (tons)	305,000	452,000	800,000
Electric power (kilowatts)	41,000	56,000	250,000
Paper (tons)	2,000	9,000	45,000
Textiles, machine-made (meters)	18,600,000	55,500,000	130,000,000
Sugar (tons)	Few 100	30,000	45,000
Apatite (tons)	Nil	700,000	1,200,000
Steel (tons)	Nil	Nil	200,000 (by 1966)
Pig iron (tons)	Nil	13,000	200,000
Grain (tons)	2,450,000	(Unavailable)	8,500,000

These figures are far from giving the real picture of what had been achieved since the ceasefire. Maximum output in various branches under the French occupation bore no relation to the situation at the time of take-over. Actual capacity of electric power, for instance, was only 15,000 kilowatts. Coal production throughout the resistance years had averaged around 640,000 tons and the French had removed key equipment from the Hongay mines when they left. The Haiphong cement plant had been run to a standstill, all raw materials exhausted or removed together with essential spare parts. Production for the first year the French left was only 8,500 tons. There was not a single Vietnamese specialist at the cement works — the highest-ranking technicians were

some fitters — but it was the Vietnamese workers at the plant who got it running again and it is they who manage it today — plus one Rumanian chemist.

Just as Thai Nguyen was being built up as the country's main heavy industry center, so Viet Tri was being developed as a new light industry center to supplement those at Hanoi and Haiphong. On the junction of the Red and Clear rivers, about 40 miles northwest of Hanoi, it used to be an important French military post, headquarters of the First and Fifth Foreign Legion regiments and the Third African regiment. When I visited it first as the French pulled out in 1954, it was a filthy, depressing mess of a place. Concrete forts like fat, malignant spiders squatting in webs of barbed wire which completely enfolded them, at every road junction or high point; the streets littered with debris as if they had not been cleaned for a century; barbed wire — by far the most plentiful symbol of French occupation — everywhere and behind the barbed wire were mines, 4,000 of them in the half square mile which represented the center of Viet Tri.

"It was a town of three streets under the French," said Luu Tarn Giap, member of the town council, "a town of bars and brothels, as typical a French Legion post as you could find. There were 300 shops for the compulsory purchase of alcohol, and there was a tiny plant for making paper pulp for the French paper factory at Dap Cau. And that was all."

Viet Tri is a very different place today. A long row of cream-colored factories lining the Red River waterfront; two and three-storied apartment houses going up in a parklike residential quarter, everything spick and span and sparklingly clean. Bamboo rafts, piled high with purple sugar cane, were tied up below the first two of the line of factories. As fast as the cane disappeared into the sugar refinery, the bamboo rafts were broken up to be digested by the adjacent plant and transformed into paper. After the sugar had been pulped out of the cane, the latter also was passed along to the paper plant. Third in the line, a chemical plant was producing soda — among other products — for both sugar and paper mill. A rice-husking mill alongside, turned out byproducts for a plastics plant — the bamboo rafts also made a contribution to the latter. Finishing touches were being given to two more plants for insecticides and pre-fab concrete building elements. Raft-loads of haricot beans were being swallowed up by a food-flavoring factory. Apart from the pre-fab plant built with Bulgarian aid, and some Soviet turbines for the electric power plant, the whole project was being done with Chinese aid. This is the sort of thing the Americans could be doing in the South if they were not so intent on killing "Viet Cong."

"It's all a very harmonious project of inter-related factories," said Luu Tam Giap after he had shown me around this thriving center, the rivers below us a-bustle with tugs, small river freighters fussing about, and red-sailed fishing boats weaving their way through convoys of bamboo rafts. "We will continue to develop it that way."

Division of the country and the fact that trade contacts are absolutely banned by the U.S.-Diem regime, has produced some stupid and some surprising results — mostly to

the detriment of the South. Haiphong cement, judged by experts to be of very high quality, equal to the best British-made, is exported to almost every country in Southeast Asia — with the exception of South Vietnam which buys inferior quality at a higher price from the United States. As with Haiphong cement, so also with Hongay coal which is exported all over Asia — including Japan — but not to South Vietnam. On the other hand, the North has been forced to start producing rubber, an exclusive product of the South before, and coffee, almost exclusive to the South, on a large scale.

New Crops for a New Country

I visited a big state farm which stretches from the Pacific coast to the borders of Laos, just north of the 17th parallel, where rubber has been grown experimentally with excellent results, a very important success for North Vietnam. The French had made some tests and concluded that rubber could not be grown north of the 14th parallel. But at the Guyet Thang farm, I saw rows of slim young trees, planted after the ceasefire, thin lines of milky latex following the incisions made in the bark, dripping into cups pegged into the trunks. Like most other state farms, especially those near frontier areas, this one was started by the army. For the first years it was run by a regular army unit. Later the troops were demobbed and became civilian farmers.

The difficulties of the sea wind and low humidity discouraged the French from taking the planting of rubber trees in the North beyond the experimental stage. However, the state farm has overcome these difficulties by planting many green plants to increase the humidity and rows of the quick-growing casuarina trees around the rubber trees to protect them from the sea breezes. In addition to the locally produced stock, many trees were flown in from Hainan Island, China. Of the 2,000 workers on the 2,350-acre rubber plantation, almost all were demobbed soldiers. They looked fit and as brown as berries.

At the Ministry of State Farms, I found out that 9,000 acres had already been planted with rubber and that this would increase to 50,000 by 1965. Several rubber products' plants have been built in the North, including a large factory for automobile tires that will go into full production by 1963.

I asked the Vice-Minister of State Farms, Nguyen Quang Xa, if this long term investment in rubber would not mean over-production after reunification. Although he acknowledged that it would have been easier to extend the rubber plantations in the South, there was no question of finding a market for the rubber production of both North and South among the Socialist countries.

The story of coffee is similar to that of rubber except that before the resistance there were a few thousand acres of coffee trees in the North, but these were severely damaged during the war. Now there are 15,000 acres of coffee trees and there will be a total of 90,000 acres of coffee under cultivation by 1965, yielding 7,000 tons of coffee. This is

extremely important for North Vietnam's economy, since a ton of coffee is equal in money value to ten tons of steel.

Almost all the rubber, coffee, cotton, and other new crops in the North are being produced in the big state farms which accounted for six percent of all agricultural production in 1961. They were being expanded faster than the cooperatives and are expected to account for 15 percent of farm products by 1965.

"Don't you have difficulties in such rapid expansion?" I asked. The ex-major laughed: "What do you think? We are peasants used to managing plots about one fifth of an acre. Now we have to manage farms that average 2,500 acres each. The fight against pests, for instance, demands technical skill that we don't have yet. By 1965, we plan to have on every farm, one university-graduated specialist in every branch of production."

I asked about the role of the state farms in opening the virgin lands.

"First you must understand that development of our agriculture is made more difficult by the division of the country. It was the South that was the main rice granary in the past. The North used to get rice from the South in exchange for coal and manufactured products. The arable land in the North is far more limited than in the South. There could be a vast expansion of food production in the South without too much effort — and will be later on. They will benefit by the experiences we are storing up here. But even with the country reunified, it is still necessary to open up our own reserves. The amount of land at present under cultivation in the North is one eleventh of a hectare [just over 900 square yards] per head of the population. The average number of working days for a peasant in the Delta is only 100 per year. After all, there's a limit to what one person can do on plots so small, even if he gives personal attention to every rice plant.

"During the five-year plan, about 1,375,000 acres of virgin lands are to be opened up and 500,000 acres of this will be tackled by our ministry. Our role is the vanguard one. We will help the new settlers as well as pushing on with our own program. Immigrant farms will be grouped around ours so we can keep a friendly eye on them and give a hand when necessary."

"Was Soviet experience in their big drive against the virgin lands of any help?"

"Not much yet in the actual clearing, because their new lands were opened up mostly with a vast concentration of machines. At present we still do almost everything by hand. Once we have machines, we will learn much from them. When the land is cleared, Soviet and Chinese experience in soil surveys is very precious for us even now. There are quite a few Soviet specialists on the state farms doing valuable work." He concluded our interview by saying:

"The great day will be when we can share all the experience we ourselves have accumulated and all those brought to us by our comrades from the socialist lands, with

our compatriots in the South. This is the moment we are all waiting for — and working for."

Part Two: LAOS IN PERSPECTIVE

CHAPTER IX: COUNTER-REVOLUTION

A Fateful Assassination

The sharp bark of a gun shattering the evening quiet of the Laotian capital of Vientiane on September 18, 1954. A man, conveniently placed by his host near the open window, slumped forward clutching his stomach and then collapsed in a spreading pool of blood on the polished floor. His host took a long pull at his cigar and sent for the police. The murdered man was Kou Voravong, Laotian Minister of Defense and head of the Democratic Party of Laos. His "crimes", in the view of those who paid the Thai assassin — and arranged his flight back across the Mekong to Thailand-were manifold. As delegate to the 1954 Geneva Conference, he had signed the ceasefire agreements, as he was instructed by his Prime Minister, Souvanna Phouma. Another delegate, his cigar-smoking host that fateful night, had refused to sign. He was Phoui Sananikone, Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time of Geneva. Moreover, in the National Assembly Voravong had just revealed that an American agent had paid Sananikone $1,000,000 not to sign, and the money had been deposited in a Swiss bank.

To add to his "crimes," Kou Voravong had denounced plans for a treacherous attack upon the Pathet Lao forces as they regrouped in the two northern provinces under the terms of the Geneva Agreements. Finally, only nine days before, the man who now lay still on the floor of Sananikone's villa had arranged and taken part in the first meeting between the half-brother Princes, Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong, aimed at starting the political negotiations between the Royal government and Pathet Lao, as provided at Geneva.

It took almost eight years to remedy the political effects of the assassination and its implications. In the fury of charges resulting from the assassination, with CIA dollar notes in Vientiane as plentiful as a shower of Wall street ticker tape, the government of Souvanna Phouma was forced to resign. It was replaced by one under Katay Don Sasorith, who had caught the baleful eye of John Foster Dulles with a book, *Laos — Ideal Cornerstone in the Anti-Communist Struggle in Southeast Asia.* Katay and Sananikone were the two politicians in whom the State Department, not to mention the secret funds department, placed their major investments in Laos.

This is more than a figure of speech. It was literally true. All U.S. dollar "aid" passed through a bank which Katay specially founded for the purpose. Katay, a minor colonial official until John Foster took him under his wing, suddenly burgeoned forth as the leading Laotian capitalist, with heavy investments in any field through which U.S. "aid" could be channeled. There was a saying in Vientiane, when I first visited the capital in 1956: "Where there is Lao Thai, there is also Katay." The "Lao-Thia" bank and the "Lao-

Thai" monopoly were private concerns of Katay and his high-placed Thai friends, to skim the cream off the $50,000,000 or so that were to be poured into the country each year.

One of Katay's more modest moves up the economic and social ladder had been to marry the sister of Prince Boun Oum of Champassac, the southernmost of the original three principalities of Laos. Until the Americans began to finance them, most of the treasure of Katay and Boun Oum came from contraband sales of opium, seized from monstrous taxes levied on the Lao Xung and Lao Thenh minorities by Boun Oum's agents. Originally these opium deals had passed through the hands of former Emperor Bao Dai of Vietnam. Later, Katay arranged for them to be funnelled through members of the Ngo Dinh Diem family. But this was small stuff compared to the pickings of a prime minister compradore engaged in selling an entire country.

Sananikone, who developed as the country's second biggest capitalist, had to be content with much smaller pickings, the crumbs in fact which fell from the rich Katay table. This provoked bitter jealousy between the two men, each had his own political party. Despite his having arranged the assassination of Voravong (as was being freely stated in Vientiane), despite having proved himself as faithful an agent of the United States as the most exacting master could demand, he had been pushed almost completely into the shadows by Katay.

Obviously a bill was piling up for Katay to settle after he had salted the first few million dollars away. It was presented personally by Dulles at the end of February 1955. He dropped in on Vientiane after a SEATO meeting in Bangkok. Five weeks later Katay produced the first dividends on the already considerable investments by opening an offensive against the Pathet Lao troops. The latter, having taken part in the resistance war against the French colonialists practically all over the country, had withdrawn to the two northern provinces of Sam Neua and Phong Saly in accordance with the Geneva Agreements, pending a negotiated political settlement between Pathet Lao and the Royal government.

From the beginning, in fact, Katay had accepted the U.S. demand for a "military solution." In April 1955, this must have looked very easy to Katay. A few weeks earlier he had attended the inaugural meeting of SEATO as an "observer." He had heard Dulles boast that the United States "now had a greater military potential in the Pacific than at the height of the war against Japan." Dulles had listed 400 naval vessels, including America's largest aircraft carriers, and 350,000 naval personnel and marines; five army divisions and supporting units totalling 300,000 men "armed with the latest weapons," 30 air squadrons, and all the rest of the "brink of war" paraphernalia.

With all that to back him, with U.S. arms and planes and unlimited dollars already at his disposal inside the country, how could Katay fail to deal with a few hundred Pathet Lao guerillas in a matter of weeks? SEATO was there to back him in case of difficulties.[15]

Things did not develop as Katay, or Dulles, planned. They rarely did. The offensive launched against Sam Neua, seemed at first to go with a swing. After a few weeks Katay's troops had pushed through to capture Muong Peun, about 20 miles south of the provincial capital, and Katay sent in a "governor" — another violation of the Geneva Agreements which placed the two provinces under Pathet Lao administration pending the negotiated settlement. In the months that followed military affairs became more complicated. Offensives bogged down and guerillas harassed the rear of Katay's troops. Battalions of commandos which parachuted from U.S. planes on to mountain peaks and ridges, deep inside Pathet Lao territory, found they could not come down from their peaks and ridges. So they stayed up there and ate the scientifically prepared but unpalatable cold rations that American planes continued to drop them. When things went wrong on the battlefield, Katay was willing to negotiate, until he had regrouped for further attacks — a constant pattern throughout 1955.

When the two princes had met on September 9 of the previous year, they had quickly reached agreement on the site and date of the talks for a political agreement between the Royal government and the Pathet Lao, and on the subjects to be discussed. Talks were set to start on December 30. But with Katay in the saddle, and the launching of the offensive against the Pathet Lao this initial effort to carry out the Geneva Agreements came to naught. A detailed survey of the course of the talks during 1955 makes weary reading. They stopped and started according to the exigencies of Katay's military activities. Before they were finally broken off in November 1955, the Royal delegates had interrupted them seven times by simply walking out and not fixing a date for their return. The Pathet Lao delegates did not once interrupt the talks. Instead they waited patiently until the Royal delegates returned. Each of the five times the talks were broken off on the Plain of Jars, the Pathet Lao delegates were guarded like prisoners. "If we tried to go more than fifty paces from the residence," Nouhak, one of the delegates told me later, "the soldiers cocked their rifles. Even if we had to visit the toilet, we were followed by police."

During the talks the Katay delegates demanded that all Pathet Lao organizations be dissolved, including the armed forces, the Lao Itsala Front,[16] the women and youth

---

[15] Quite illegally, at the SEATO meeting, Laos as well as Cambodia and South Vietnam, were placed under SEATO "protection." Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia promptly rejected such "protection" as did Prince Souvanna Phouma for Laos, when he later came to power again.

[16] The Lao Itsala Front or Free Laos was created on August 18, 1945, with the proclamation of Laotian independence from France. It was a broad group consisting of most of the elements of the Laotian resistance.

organizations. They wanted to revive the iniquitous "tasseng" system of semi-slavery, long abolished in the Pathet Laos areas.

After the talks were shifted to Vientiane, an attempt was made to bribe the Pathet Lao leaders, but this failed. Finally direct talks were arranged by the International Commission between Souphanouvong and Katay in Rangoon, starting October 19, 1955. A ceasefire agreement was reached, but a day later Katay's troops launched a major offensive into the two provinces guaranteed to the Pathet Lao by the Geneva Agreements, Sam Neua and Phong Saly. Within the next five weeks, Katay's forces launched 34 attacks. Prince Souphanouvong told me of the Pathet Lao's reaction to Katay's open violation of the ceasefire agreement in an interview in his jungle headquarters at a later date:

"Everything must have been prepared well in advance and the final touches were given while Katay was signing the ceasefire agreements to lull our vigilance and to pretend to the outside world that he wanted peace. The Royal delegation finally and unilaterally broke off the talks two weeks after the Rangoon agreement. By that time more than half their entire army were already inside our two provinces. They had forced us into the position where the only alternatives were to surrender or to fight. Of course we decided to fight," he said. "And we will fight under the slogan of peace, democracy, and independence. We will fight and we will win," he added with great conviction.

The Futile Offensive

Beginning from late November 1955, the biggest offensives were launched against the Pathet Laos positions, and in December Katay held elections from which the Pathet Lao were excluded. About this time I visited the Pathet Lao area and was able to meet the leaders, cadres, rank and file soldiers, and the people who lived in the regions administered by the Pathet Lao.

According to prisoners captured, U.S. military "advisers" were directing operations from a base just south of Sam Neua province, in Xieng Khouang. They had tried to send troops in by land routes, but these had been blocked off by the guerillas. So planes were used to parachute them in. American strategy was to form a line, running southwest-northeast and hinged at a point about 30 miles from the provincial capital. As soon as the line was formed, it would swing around on its northern axis to engulf the town of Sam Neua. With another swing or two, just like troops on a parade ground, it would clear the province up to the Vietnamese frontier.

Like the Dien Bien Phu operation, it must have looked good on the war maps the Americans are such experts in preparing. At first a platoon was dropped on a mountain peak, and as usual promptly wiped out. Next time two platoons were dropped and eventually a company for each peak. Peaks were occupied triangle fashion and each

corner of a triangle absorbed one company, a battalion per triangle. And there were nothing but maintain peaks in Sam Neua and Phong Saly provinces. Worst of all from the U.S.-Katay viewpoint, companies could not establish contact. They could not get down into the valleys to link up their positions. They tried, but were cut to pieces by either guerillas or regular Pathet Lao troops.

By mid-December, a large proportion of the best troops of the Royal army were like the unfortunate hunter who "got up a tree but couldn't get down" because of the tiger at the bottom. Six infantry battalions, one company of parachutists and 15 companies of commandos were sitting on top of a total of 35 peaks in Sam Neua, and there were thousands more to cover. They could not move and they could not link up. Attempts to join up and form a definite line cost them heavy casualties. Pathet Lao fire sent them scuttling back to their trenches on the mountain tops again. They could not move even to requisition food. They had to be supplied by parachute.

But the flanks of the mountains remained in Pathet Lao hands. Behind the ridges, the whole area was held by guerillas. Ahead of them were the regular Pathet Lao forces. When orders were given for the great sweep, a few disjointed parts creaked forward only to run into a hail of fire. Cold, weary, and starving Royal conscripts stumbled down from the mountains with white flags, cursing Katay, cursing the Americans, and asking to surrender. They were welcomed as brothers.

The defeat of Katay's November-December operations could be concealed for a time but not forever. Vientiane hospitals were full of armless and legless victims of the policies Katay was carrying out on behalf of the Americans. Katay tried to disperse the wounded as far as possible in the provinces, and during the campaign for the December 1955 elections, carried out without the participation of the Pathet Lao, he presented his defeat as a great "victory."

As he controlled the electoral machinery, Katay's party won a majority of seats. It was noteworthy, however, that in Vientiane, where voting and counting procedures could be more fairly controlled, the party headed by Thao Bong Souvannavong came out well on top. He had campaigned on the basis of real negotiations with the Pathet Lao to end the civil war. On his initiative, the "National Salvation" group was formed inside the National Assembly, pledged to end the war against the Pathet Lao by negotiations, some members of Katay's own party joining this group. There was a prolonged government crisis at the very time when Sihanouk's stubborn defense of Cambodian neutrality and rejection of SEATO was attracting world — and Laotion — attention. Eventually after almost three months of crisis, Prince Souvanna Phouma succeeded in forming a government. He pledged himself to settle the dispute with Pathet Lao by "diplomatic means," to pursue a policy of neutrality, and to base his foreign policy on the five principles of coexistence.

Katay and Dulles and everything they stood for had been defeated. The fall of Katay was a sign that a settlement with the Pathet Lao could not be achieved by military

means. There could be no "liquidation" of the Pathet Lao forces and no military "occupation" of the two northern provinces.

The 1956 Agreement

In July 1956, Prince Souphanouvong, chief of the Pathet Lao armed forces, stepped out of a plane at Vientiane airport. It was the first time he had set foot there for over ten years. Most of the period since the battle of Thakhek in 1946, he had spent in the jungle. But he looked trim and fit. Leading members of the government were there to meet him. As he stepped from the plane, he was clasped in the arms of his brother, Prime Minister Prince Souvanna Phouma with whom he would soon start negotiations. There were other members of the cabinet present who had also taken part in the August 1945 uprising against the French and who had been with Souphanouvong in exile in Thailand. The arrival of the Pathet Lao leader was the result of delicate feelers for some months previously to establish the basis of renewed negotiations. The atmosphere was cordial from the start, as it had been at the September 1954 meeting, before Katay took over.

It was not long before agreement was reached on certain basic principles, on an agenda, and on the form the negotiations should take. These were set forth in Joint Declarations on August 5 and 10. It was decided to set up three commissions, two of them political and the third military, to work out agreement on the various problems at issue. The commissions started work on September 29, and by October 31 full agreement had been reached on the precise details of carrying out the ceasefire. (Since Souvanna Phouma had taken over as Prime Minister, there had been virtually no activity on the battle front.) Two days later, the first political commission reached agreement on "ways and means of applying a policy of peace and neutrality," and fell entirely within the Geneva accord.

The Agreement called for a foreign policy based on the five principles of peaceful coexistence; aid from all countries wishing to help Laos "without any political or economic strings," and the immediate establishment of diplomatic relations with all neighboring countries. It proclaimed that Laos would "not adhere to any military alliance and not permit any country to set up their military bases on Laotian territory apart from those envisaged in the Geneva Agreement."

A third agreement, signed on December 24, guaranteed civil rights for members and supporters of the Pathet Lao forces, and for the former participants of the resistance throughout the country, "in conformity with the spirit of national reconciliation and the unification of the Fatherland and in conformity with the aspirations of the entire people."

Furthermore, the Neo Lao Haksat (United National Lao Front, established in January 1956 as a still broader version of the Lao Itsala Front) and all its affiliates were

recognized as legal political organizations. It would be a punishable offense to take any disciplinary or discriminatory measures against Pathet Lao members and supporters or impose any restrictions on their democratic freedoms because of "military, political or administrative activity indulged in from March 9, 1945, to this day." Pathet Lao personnel would be integrated into the various administrative and technical services based on their functions and ranks in the Pathet Lao administration, with the same priorities and privileges as members of the Royal government.

There was joy throughout the land when these three agreements were capped on December 28 by a joint communique issued by Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong announcing the intention to form a government of National Union with Pathet Lao participation.

After the formation of the new government, the Neo Lao Haksat would start functioning as any other political party. As concerns the two northern provinces, the communique continued, "the two princes have agreed that immediately after the formation of the government of National Union, the administration as well as the combat units in the two provinces of Phong Saly and Sam Neua should be placed under the control of the said government.

Laotian St. Bartholomew's Eve

If the agreement of December 1956 on forming the government of national coalition under Souvanna Phouma seems like a bad joke of history in the light of subsequent events, it is still worth remembering in trying to see ahead after the similar agreement in June 1962.

The U.S. Embassy launched a tremendous campaign against the 1956 agreements. Embassy members personally visited every member of the National Assembly to buy votes to prevent ratification. When bribes failed, threats were used that all U.S. aid would be cut the day "Communists" entered a Laotian government, and rice and oil supplies were halted as a warning. I visited Vientiane at the height of the U.S. campaign with a visa valid for a week and promptly extended to two weeks on arrival at the airport. But on specific demands of the U.S. advisers to Katay's police, I was expelled within 24 hours. The Americans wanted no eyewitnesses around at that time. But I managed to meet National Assembly deputies who told me of the huge bribes being offered for a "No" vote on the agreements.

There is not space here to go into all the intrigues and ups and downs that followed. U.S. pressures managed to get formation of a coalition government delayed until August 1957, and a new set of agreements had to be negotiated in October the same year, providing for Royal control over the two provinces and integration of two Pathet Lao battalions into the Royal army. Prince Souvanna Phouma headed the new government,

and also held the Defense Ministry. Prince Souphanouvong became minister of Economic Planning and a second Pathet Lao member, Phoumi Vongvichit, was Minister of Education. Ominously Katay became Minister of the Interior, while Sananikone became Minister of Foreign Affairs. The Royal administration took over in Sam Neua and Phong Saly in November 1957. Members of the Pathet Lao went back to their home towns and villages, except for two battalions which were to be integrated, as intact units, in the Royal Army.

The "complementary" elections, due to be held in January 1958, were postponed till May, in order for Katay to have more time for "adequate preparations." These included encircling every bureau of the Neo Lao Haksat with armed guards, arresting anyone who came near, including many Neo Lao Haksat functionaries; preventing any electioneering on the pretext that this was "subversive propaganda." But the elections did take place on May 4, and were a terrible shock to the U.S. State Department. The Neo Lao Haksat only presented ten candidate for the 21 seats — and nine were elected. The Santiphap Pencan, or Peace and Neutrality Party allied with them, won three of four seats contested, in addition to four it already held in the National Assembly. Only four of Katay's 26 candidates (for 21 seats!) were elected, and none at all of Sananikone's. The results created a black panic for Katay and his U.S. backers. Twelve Pathet Lao and allied deputies elected out of 14 presented for 21 seats! And general elections for all 59 National Assembly seats due within a year! One did not need to be a mathematical genius to forecast the results. A month after the May 4 elections, Katay and Sananikone announced they had joined forces to form the "Rally of the Laotian People." It was a poor, patched-up job and the Americans knew it. But there were few other politicians who would take their money at that time. Two days later, something nearer and dearer to the CIA heart was launched. "The Committee for the Defense of National Interests" (CDNI), formed by fascist-minded army officers under "strong man" General Phoumi Nosavan, announced its intention to become the real power in the land.

From then on things were to move quickly, and satisfactorily as far as the United States was concerned. By the simple process of paying $100,000 upwards for each National Assembly vote, the Americans brought down the Souvanna Phouma government on July 22. The Prince was asked by Savang Vatthana, the Crown Prince, next day to form another government. Two weeks later, Souvanna Phouma had to announce that he was unable to form a government because the newly formed Committee of General Nosavan, which did not hold a single seat in the Assembly, was demanding eight of the 12 cabinet posts. Sananikone was then asked to form a government and, the scale of U.S. bribes being so generous by then, that it took a pretty stout patriot to refuse, he received the National Assembly's approval by 27-21 votes with 11 abstentions on August 18, for a government which violated all agreements by excluding the two Neo Lao Haksat ministers. The ministries of Defense and Interior were

placed in the hands of Katay, and how he must have rubbed those treacherous hands with glee at that moment. Into them, this time had really been delivered his enemies, by whatever Lord that Katay recognized.

Now he could really strike and take revenge against those humiliating defeats of 1955. And strike he did. In the two northern provinces, repression was especially savage. Every single Pathet Lao cadre that Katay's troops and police could lay hands on was murdered. In Sam Neua, troops were first sent to seal off the frontiers with North Vietnam and then the systematic killing started. In Phong Saly hardly a single cadre escaped. There was little chance to escape. Former Pathet Lao personnel had long been members of the Royal administration, following the agreed integration process. They were killed at their posts. In lower Laos the same thing. In Attopeu province, a former resistance base to which Pathet Lao personnel had returned only after the October 1957 agreements, members at every bureau of the Neo Lao Haksat were murdered. In other provinces the only variations were between the proportion of those killed to those arrested. Decapitated heads were stuck up on stakes in district and provincial centers as proof that the Pathet Lao had physically ceased to exist.

It was a Laotian St. Bartholomew's Eve, but spread over several months. Katay did not have enough troops and police to do the bloody job in one fell blow. The murders and arrests went on through early 1959, as part of the essential preparation for the intended *coup de grace* against the two battalions and the arrest of the Pathet Lao leadership. This was the background to the May 1959 crisis and the recommencement of the civil war.

Connivance from Abroad

On the international front the reopening of the civil war by the Sananikone government led to frenzied activity. To cover up the illegal importation of U.S. arms, Sananikone alleged (January 17, 1959) that troops of North Vietnam had violated Laotian borders. In his reply, Premier Pham Van Dong of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam denounced the ferocious repression of the Pathet Lao and exposed the wholesale importation of U.S. arms. To examine the charge of intervention from the North, which he denied, he demanded that the ICC should immediately be convened. On February 11, at a press conference, Sananikone announced that as far as his government was concerned the ICC had ceased to exist.

Immediately, the governments of North Vietnam and China, as neighboring countries and participants in the 1954 Geneva Conference, asked the Soviet Union and Britain, as Co-Chairmen of the Geneva meeting, to take action against the Laotian government's unilateral repudiation of the Geneva Agreements. The British government failing to respond, the USSR on March 26, 1959, sent a note to London proposing that the Co-

Chairmen should request the ICC to reconvene as soon as possible. On April 20, Nehru also made a similar request.

There was a stony silence from the British government.

Then came the escape of the two Pathet Lao battalions (described in the next chapter). Again on May 30, 1959, the USSR tried to get the British to reconvene the ICC. The British and Soviet foreign ministers met in Geneva (June 4-8) to discuss Laos, and finally on June 9, ten weeks after the original Soviet request, the British government deigned to reply. It "was unable to see" any violation of the Geneva Agreements.

Following resounding defeats for his troops in the northern provinces by the reconstituted Pathet Lao forces, Sananikone again claimed an "invasion" from North Vietnam. On August 4, 1959, he proclaimed a state of emergency in the former Pathet Lao bases of Sam Neua and Phong Saly and three other provinces. At the same time, he appealed to the UN for help, repeating the request a few weeks later, specifically demanding the despatch of a UN "Emergency Force." On August 12, the Chinese government condemned the repression in Laos, accused the United States of stepping up the creation of military bases near the borders of China and North Vietnam, and again demanded the reactivization of the ICC. Five days later the Soviet government again expressed its view that normal conditions could be restored if the Laotian government carried out the 1954 agreements in cooperation with the ICC. On September 5, the North Vietnam government expressed similar views.

At a Security Council meeting held on September 7, 1959, to consider the Laotian complaint. The USSR pointed out that the Sananikone government's campaign of repression had given rise to the civil war and again urged a return to the Geneva Agreements. On September 14, the Soviet government called for an international conference to be attended by the countries that took part in the 1954 Geneva Conference, but this was promptly turned down by the British, and a U.S. State Department spokesman said that such a conference would be "unnecessary and disruptive." Nevertheless, a majority decision in the Security Council resulted in the despatch of a UN observer mission to Laos — which found no evidence of any invasion forces from the North.

CHAPTER X: STRANGER THAN FICTION

Escape From Prison

An hour after midnight on May 23, 1960, the gates of a Vientiane prison swung open and a posse of 26 armed Laotian military police marched out. Powerful floodlights set up at each corner of the prison illuminated the courtyard and road as if by daylight. Opposite the prison gate were the quarters of about 90 more MP's and their American advisers.

The crews of four tanks on permanent watch outside the prison saluted as the leader of the posse marched his men within a few feet of the tanks and headed for a nearby Buddhist pagoda. The streets were silent except for the clop-clop of their heavy military boots. The heady perfume of frangipani blossoms hung in the night air, freshened by a heavy, tropical downpour an hour earlier. At the pagoda, the troop halted. A knock on the door — and three young bonzes inside paled with fear. They had been warned, but could not seriously believe they were to be arrested, taken out of town, and shot. Now it seemed their time had come. But why such a formidable force?

A few words in low tones were exchanged, a bundle handed over and the bonzes emerged, not in their usual saffron robes, but in civilian robes with their heads covered. Silently the group continued to march, this time heading for a small wood about six miles from the center of Vientiane. Had an outsider been watching, he would have noticed that some of the MP's marched unsteadily, often stumbling, sometimes falling on the ploughed ground as if the boots were too heavy for them.

In the little wood, the outsider would have observed something quite extraordinary. After helmets had been removed, there were fervent embraces between 16 of the MP's. They hugged and kissed each other, spoke in broken tones. Tears rolled down grey, unshaven cheeks. Another MP was hugging almost as fervently one of the bonzes. Although they had marched only six miles from the prison, dawn was about to break through purple thunder clouds by the time they reached the wood. After the embraces and almost inarticulate greetings, most of the group dropped off into a deep slumber.

A few hours later one of those on guard switched on a tiny transistor radio and chuckled at the report of a tremendous sensation in Vientiane. Prince Souphanouvong, head of the Pathet Lao and 15 other Pathet Lao leaders had escaped from Vientiane prison, where they had been waiting trial and an expected death sentence for ten months. With them had disappeared the entire prison guard. As the hours went by, the reports became more and more contradictory. The group had fled across the river to Thailand. A fisherman had seen a boat full of people in uniform set out at dead of night for the opposite bank. Other reports described a truck that had pulled up outside the

prison shortly after midnight and had then started off at high speed. Later came other confirmatory reports of a truck in the small hours travelling at high speed on the road that led south — then east towards Vietnam. Police and troops everywhere had been mobilized to scour the countryside and follow up every report, to check every car and truck on the road, every boat on the river.

Meanwhile Souphanouvong was having his first free sleep in ten months. And so were 15 of his companions in the little wood, six miles from Vientiane.

Telling me of this, just two years later, Souphanouvong said: "The Vientiane Plain is very bare. There was only this one little wood. It was the only obvious place for anyone to look. But General Nosavan's officers were quite convinced we had left by road. And we had taken care that circumstantial reports of our flight by truck would reach them.

"Fortunately, there was a torrential downpour just about the time we reached the wood and this washed out any traces of our flight. It was a terribly difficult march, because we were all so weak. In prison, we had had no exercise at all. We were all in heavy MP boots which seemed to weigh tons. They were new, which made it worse. I fainted several times through weakness. My feet were bleeding. Almost all my toenails had gone and the blood was squelching in my boots."

Souphanouvong, a sturdy well-knit figure, his energetic, intelligent face stained a deep brown today after 17 years of jungle warfare, was the 20th and last son of Prince Boun Khong, head of one of Laos' three royal families. The late Prince Phetsarat, former viceroy of Laos, was the eldest son; in between was Prince Souvanna Phouma, the present Prime Minister of Laos. From his boyhood years, Souphanouvong disliked the emptiness of court life. Phetsarat had forward-looking ideas and he encouraged both half-brothers to study; he himself set an example by becoming an engineer, a specialist in printing machinery. Souvanna Phouma and Souphanouvong also studied engineering in Paris and the three half brothers became the only engineers in Laos, Souvanna Phouma taking a triple degree in marine, electrical, and construction engineering, Souphanouvong heading his class with a brilliant civil engineering First at France's famous *Ecole des Ponts et Chaussees.*

During his work later, building roads and bridges in Vietnam, Souphanouvong was moved by the misery of workers on the railways, mines, and rubber plantations. He had already some political convictions through contact with progressives in France. He was in Vietnam when the Japanese invaded Indo-China and associated himself with the resistance movement led by the Vietminh. Once he met Ho Chi Minh and asked his advice as to what should be done in Laos.

"Seize power from the colonialists," was the reply. This he set about doing. And this was how he later became head of the Pathet Lao movement which fought side by side with the Vietminh against the French comeback in Indo-China.

Escape of Pathet Lao Battalions

One primary aim of the Americans was to win over key Pathet Lao officers. Attempts at the abortive ceasefire conference at Rangoon in 1955 to buy over Prince Souphanouvong himself had been rudely rebuffed. But a prime target now was Colonel Singkapo,[17] head of the Pathet Lao armed forces. Singkapo was regarded as a brilliant officer, widely respected throughout the country not only as a soldier, but as an intellectual. He had been a schoolteacher — a much-respected profession in a country where education is had with such difficulty. Who could they send to work on Singkapo? The CIA combed through its files, sought the advice of General Phoumi Nosavan, the "strong man" then being groomed for his role as chief power in the land. They needed someone who knew Singkapo well, but someone who was absolutely reliable. In the end they hit on a young officer who not only came from the same village in Pakse province, but had studied under Singkapo as a child. He was in an all-American formed unit. His political reliability was unquestionable; he had received his officer's training under the Americans in the Philippines.

"I was very pleased to see this young man again," Singkapo, a stocky man with a strong good-humored face, told me later when I met him at his headquarters in the Plain of Jars. "And he said, he was pleased too, to reestablish contact. Of course he was only a lad when our ways parted. He continued at school and I went to set up a resistance base against the French colonialists.

"At first the talks were about old times. Then he started getting down to the main subject. I should come over to the Royal Army — he had been assured I would have the rank of Colonel. He was only a junior officer and would be glad to serve under me.

"I replied that we have both chosen military careers. This is an honorable career. But what are our aims? For me it was clear. The good of the country, the good of the people. 'You also became a military officer for good patriotic reasons,' I told him, 'to serve your country as an honest soldier. But in fact you are forced to serve against it. What have been the results? Your unit has consistently been defeated; its strength had constantly decreased. Because the people are against you, because you are fighting brother Loatians.' He told me once that he also felt this very strongly; it was a matter which constantly worried him and many of his brother officers.

"Once he came and said: 'What you say is right. It is what I have felt for a long time. Now, for the truth. I was sent here by the Americans to win you over, to get you to accept the rank the Americans are willing to give you. You would have an easy life — plenty of money and a good living.'

"I replied: 'I took part in the resistance for the easy life, the happiness and prosperity of all Laotians, including you. I could no longer do that if I served the Americans.' He was

[17] Singkapo Chunamali Sikhot, member Central Committee of Neo Lao Haksat.

very pleased with this reply and said: 'It's what I expected from you and I honor you for it. When the right time comes, you may find support from unexpected quarters. Many of us are sick of this business of killing our brother Laotians.' Our discussions went on over three months and then the Americans apparently concluded he had failed and he was sent away."

In the meantime, the two Pathet Lao battalions had been encircled. General Phoun Sipaseut, one of the two deputy-chairman of Souvanna Phouma's High Military Council when I met him in the Plain of Jars, filled in briefly what happened.

In February 1959 the two battalions were separated. Battalion 1 was sent to Xien Ngeun near Luang Prabang, Battalion 2 to the Plain of Jars. Both positions were in low-lying ground. Rations which had formerly been distributed by the month were now handed out on a day-to-day basis. The rice ration for the 1st Battalion was cut from 800 to 400 grams per man. Gambling houses and brothels were set up near its barracks. As for 2nd Battalion, all pay was reduced, rice and firewood supplies were cut, when it was seen that officers could not be bought up. On one occasion the water supply was poisoned. Fortunately it was tested every morning, and no one suffered. "We held on despite the pressures," said the General. "At one point we were ordered to lay down our arms because they were going to be replaced with new ones. We replied that when we got the new ones, we would lay down the old ones." May 11 was the 12th anniversary of the Laotian Constitution and on May 9 the two battalions were ordered to move to certain positions to be "integrated" on May 11 — without their arms, only in shorts and shoes, to receive "new uniforms and new arms." In the meantime each of the battalions had been surrounded by three battalions of heavily-armed Royal troops, including tanks. The designated positions were barbed wire compounds. "My 2nd Battalion assembled, fully armed on the appointed day in front of its own barracks and did not move," continued General Sipaseut. "First Battalion held a meeting the previous night and opinion was divided as to what the government was up to. Officers from 2nd Battalion were visited by the Commander of the Royal army, General Ouan Rattikone, accompanied by an American adviser. The latter advised us to lay down our arms, and 'make no more trouble.' We, like 1st Battalion officers, requested time to contact our leaders in Vientiane. Then the troops were marched back into the barracks. The three-battalion encirclement had tightened now. Artillery pieces were aimed at the barracks. Forward units of the Royal army were within 15 yards of 2nd Battalion sentries."

By this time Prince Souphanouvong and other Pathet Lao leaders had been put under house arrest in Vientiane.

Another battalion and artillery reinforcements were added to the iron ring around 2nd Battalion. On May 18 an ultimatum was issued to both battalions. "Surrender within 24 hours or you'll be wiped out!" On that night, despite the tight encirclement about one third of 1st Battalion managed to escape. Early next morning, General Rattikone came in

person to receive the surrender of 2nd Battalion — but found an empty barracks. "We broke out without firing a shot," said General Sipaseut.

Back in Vientiane, Singkapo was also under house arrest. "My young officer friend tried to see me," he told me later. "But he was blocked. He managed to get me a message. Four battalions were being sent to pursue the Pathet Lao 2nd Battalion. The crack 1st Paratroops Battalion had been dropped in the path of the rapidly moving troops — and soundly thrashed. Now another battalion was being sent, under the command of my young friend. There was no way for him to refuse. What could I advise? There was nothing for him to do but go, and I told him this. But I advised: 'Don't expose yourself or the battalion too much.'

"The battalion went but before any big action, my young friend was slightly wounded. He was hospitalized for seven days but pretended the wound was more serious than it really was. Without its commander, the battalion fled at the first contact. As a sort of punishment, the Battalion was sent back to garrison duty outside Vientiane."

The 2nd Battalion escaped intact, about half the effectives of the 1st (in a more difficult situation geographically) managed eventually to filter away. After desperate and unsuccessful attempts to overtake and wipe out the Battalions, revenge was taken by throwing Souphanouvong and 15 other Neo Lao Haksat leaders into prison.

The Long March

"The day of my arrest was a very sad one for my family." Souphanouvong said when I talked about all these events with him later. "My wife had just left the hospital an hour earlier after five days there for the birth of my son. I did not see either her or my new-born son for well over a year, when we were reunited in Sam Neua.

"After they arrested us, the Nosavan clique left us for three months to reflect on our situation. We were isolated from each other, in 16 different cells. We were told that the Pathet Lao movement had now been completely liquidated. The two battalions were destroyed. We would soon be tried and hung. The whole movement was liquidated down to village cadres.

"We used every means possible to influence those with whom we were in contact, even the interrogation teams and the judges who presided over the preliminary hearings. And in fact," Souphanouvong recalled with a broad smile of satisfaction, "we won over one of the judges. He later joined our movement and was a member of our delegation at the 1961 Geneva Conference.

"But it was extraordinarily difficult. Our prison was a former stable. Each of us had a cell 6 by 12 feet, full of mice and bats and with a terrible smell of horse dung. There was one iron-barred window 12 by 9 inches. Some of the comrades are still ill because of the conditions inside the prison. First there was a barbed wire fence around us, then one of

corrugated iron. The reflected heat from the corrugated iron was terrible. We could only see the sky and the earth. Sometimes no food at all was brought. For days on end, in the hottest time of the year, there was no water for washing.

"We were forbidden to speak to each other, even in the brief moments we were allowed in the prison yard. We were forbidden to read. The only paper was for toilet purposes. We were continually searched. We had no news of any sort, except when the loudspeakers were turned up to report some gross insults and threats against ourselves. Even when my elder brother, Prince Phetsarat died and I requested permission to attend his funeral, this was refused. When Souvanna Phouma wanted to see me at this time, he was also refused at first. In the end, because he had ambassadorial rank, he got permission — but the guards ostentatiously put a tape recorder in front of us. He said what he wanted to say, but they still banned me from attending the funeral.

"For guards we had the most reactionary, military police unit — trained, equipped and paid directly by the Americans. They had been hand-picked and specially indoctrinated. They were the only ones permitted to have any contact with us. They brought our food, took away the remnants, closely guarded us. They were forbidden to exchange a single word with us or to accept anything from us. If we offered a cigarette, it was thrown on the floor. If we uttered a word, they put their hands to their ears. But still we carried out our policy of trying to win them over.

"We could not coordinate our activities. An occasional glance exchanged, a few words on a ball of toilet paper dropped on the ground — that was all. But still we managed after a while to indicate to each other which of the guards were the most promising targets for our explanations policy. I talked to them about the immorality of their bosses, their cruelty towards the people, of the anti-patriotic attitude of those who sold themselves for dollars. We were for the people; for that we had made sacrifices. Because of that we were in jail. Our interests were selfless, we were not out for personal gain. We were out to help the whole Laotian people, including the guards. For this we had voluntarily lived a hard, dangerous life in the jungle for many years. We fought for the real independence of our country. But who were they serving? Foreigners who wanted to enslave the country and corrupt elements who had sold themselves for dollars. "At first it was literally like talking to a brick wall, to the empty cell wall. But gradually, one or two started to listen at the window. The first sign of having touched the heart of one of them was when he came one day to say he had visited our families, assured them we were well. Then one day a guard came to bring my food. His fingers touched mine under the tray. He had bought some newspapers for me with his own money. Then, very gradually, others started to help. "First they brought us news — as MP's they were very well informed. Soon we had an overall picture of local and world news. Then they started acting as messengers for us. We got in contact with our organizations again, and began directing the whole movement in town and countryside from our prison

headquarters. We gradually rebuilt our whole movement. As soon as we had our organization well on its feet again, we took all necessary steps to prepare for our own flight.

"To guard against the consequences of betrayal no single friendly guard knew of any other friendly towards us. Each probably thought he was the sole 'convert'. But by the occasional stolen glance at first — and later by written messages exchanged through the guards — we all knew how many were with us and which could be depended on.

"We got to the point where we organized mass meetings in our favor in Vientiane. The guards brought us detailed reports of how public and authorities reacted. We learned the authorities were hesitant to put us on trial in view of the mass demonstrations. A date was several times announced, but always postponed.

"In early May 1960 we were tipped off that there would be no trial. The authorities knew we would use the courtroom as a forum to denounce their rotten policies. We were to be 'shot while attempting to escape' while being transferred to another prison. We challenged the prison authorities with this and told them to shoot us on the spot — they could spare themselves the farce of an escape attempt.

"This stopped them for a while, but soon after we learned a date had definitely been set for the trial, the result of which would be we would all die — legally.' We decided the time had come to flee.

"It was not easy to arrange. Of the hundred MP's assigned to guard us, eight were always on duty. But although we had won over a good many of them, it was virtually impossible to have eight friendly ones on duty on the same night. And time was pressing. I chose a night when five of the eight were friendly. And these managed, by one pretext or another, to get the other three changed for those that I indicated. The previous night, we had arranged for one of our 'friendlies' to smuggle a comrade into the prison. He was to be our guide.

"Only on the actual night of the escape did I reveal the plan — to my own comrades first, then to the guards. In principle it had been agreed with each of them separately that we would flee and they had long decided to come with us. Their patriotism and political consciousness had been aroused to that point in long, political courses which I had given them individually. There was a last minute hitch. There was a ninth MP in the prison in charge of the arsenal, and we had not had a chance to work on him. The other guards explained the situation and he agreed to come with us. But first he must take leave of his family. Of course this would have given everything away. We explained this and after three hours discussion, he saw the point.

"There was another matter we could not overlook. One of the guards had a brother who was a bonze and he learned that his brother and two other young bonzes were to be arrested and killed because of suspected left-wing sympathies. So we decided the

three must be saved. Civilian clothes should be procured for them and if they wanted, they could come along with us.

"The guards provided MP uniforms for each of us, helmets, brassards — and terrible new boots. They also brought in nylon raincoats, water-bottles, and some essential foodstuffs. Only at 8 p.m., when all this was ready, did I reveal the plan. We were taken to the arsenal — we could help ourselves. There was a fine array of arms, including some splendid automatic weapons. It was a big temptation, but we had a long, hard road ahead and we decided on one arm per man, a light carbine and plenty of cartridges.

"At a few minutes before midnight, one of the guards went out to check on the situation. Everything was all right. We waited a while and then one of our own comrades, in his MP uniform, went out. He also returned and reported: 'All in order.' The moment had come. We marched out under the bright glare of the searchlights — out past the double rows of six-feet-high barbed wire fences; out past the noses of our worst enemies who had sworn to destroy us; past the special armored unit which mounted guard for 24 hours a day; out on to the main road.

"Each step was agony for us in our weakened condition and in the unaccustomed boots which were rigid as cast iron. After we had picked up the bonzes, we set out for the wood selected for our first bivouac.

"We considered we had an 80 percent chance of success and this justified the risk. We had to take the possibility of betrayal into account, but we relied on the patriotism and newly aroused political consciousness of our guards, and we were right. And this fortified them also in the ordeals that lay ahead.

"For the next five months, we tramped through the jungle covering over 300 miles back to our old bases, handed back from one guerilla unit to another, Nosavan's troops scouring the countryside after us. It was a terrible journey. The 16 of us were very weak from our prison experiences, the guards had never been used to marching at all. The fact that there were no privileged in our party fortified them in the most difficult times. It was strictly share and share alike. Some wanted to help carry my pack, but even when I was very ill, I insisted on carrying my share. It was the same with the other leaders. This was a type of leadership the former MP's had never known. It strengthened their convictions that they were on the right track, in the right company."

The story of that five-month trek is obviously an epic in itself and there is place for only a few fragments here. The rainy season set in shortly after the escape. Tracks became quagmires, the jungle was infested with blood-sucking leeches and malaria-carrying mosquitoes. Food was always short, ordinary shelter non-existent.

"We ate all sorts of strange foods," Souphanouvong continued. "We caught iguanas and boiled them. We had no salt, but used bamboo ash instead. We found cicada eggs were edible — taste like butter. We gathered them in clusters from certain trees. For weeks on end, we followed elephant tracks but elephant dung, diluted by the torrential

rains, was impossible to avoid. It is very bad for the feet; some sort of insect works its way up through the soles.

"We were always drenched to the skin. Leeches were a constant, horrible menace. They dropped off branches into our ears, nose, and eyes and from the ground worked into our boots and in between the toes.

"One day, when the pursuit was fairly close, a Meo tribesman planted himself squarely in my path. 'I know you. You are Prince Souphanouvong,' he said. 'Come to our village.' It was our policy to avoid all villages — partly for fear of betrayal, but also to avoid reprisals being taken against the villages later for having given us shelter. We slept exclusively in the forest, in hammocks slung between trees. Villagers, usually the women, brought us food in the woods. We always exercized the greatest vigilance.

'Our village will never betray you,' he said. 'Not now or in the future. Come!' I felt safe then. When a Meo gives his word, it is for all time. So we went to the village. A buffalo was slaughtered in our honor and that night we slept in Meo huts. A rare treat!

"Up and down the mountains, through tracks that were mere tunnels in the undergrowth, always soaked, more often than not hungry, we tramped on, month after month. We became alpinists, clambering over rocky mountain passes, sometimes felling trees to bridge ravines, slithering down rocky slopes, wading across mountain torrents. We were heading back towards our old bases in Sam Neua, and had already decided we must have a province to ourselves again. When we got into the frontier country of our old zone, we could breathe more freely. People began to produce portraits of myself from carefully preserved caches in the jungle — they had kept them since the resistance days.

Kong Le's Coup

"At 8 o'clock one morning three months after our escape," continued Souphanouvong, "we switched on the little transistor set as usual to get the news, and we were electrified. It was August 9. There had been a coup in Vientiane. A young commander of a paratroop battalion had seized power and proclaimed a policy of neutrality and an end to foreign intervention. His name was Captain Kong Le. Hardly anyone had ever heard of him."

"Of course we were delighted with the news," said Singkapo, who now took up the narrative. "There was tremendous excitement when those first words were heard over the radio. What does the coup mean? Who is Kong Le? What will be his line? We strained to catch every word as if our lives depended on it. Then it came — peace, neutrality, independence, an end to foreign intervention in our country.

Three of us could relax and smile. Souphanouvong, Nouhak[18] and myself. Only we three knew that Kong Le was the young officer the Americans had sent to win me over.

"It was decided I should go back and reestablish contact. I was to travel light, and fast. What had taken us three months to cover I did in seven days and nights of travel, stopping only for snatches of sleep. I got back to a point close enough to Vientiane to establish contact with Kong Le and he sent a helicopter to pick me up. Later we fought side by side in the defense of Vientiane and again in the capture of the Plain of Jars."

Another fascinating point that Singkapo revealed during our long talk, was that Phoumi Nosavan — the pro-American general who had been doing his best to destroy Singkapo and the other Pathet Lao leaders for months past — had been befriended as a child by Singkapo: "He was an abandoned orphan." Singkapo said: "We took him in and looked after him till he was ten years old. He's chosen an odd way to show his gratitude."

I met Captain Kong Le at his headquarters in a former French Foreign Legion post at Khang Khay in the Plain of Jars — a small, slightly built smiling man. It happened to be his 28th birthday. Kong Le, like Singkapo has now been given general's rank, but still prefers to be called captain. The two were later appointed to head the Mixed High Command which runs military operations of the Souvanna Phouma government.

My main interest when I met him were his motives for the coup. After all, he had been considered one of "America's own" crack officers with all sorts of privileges far above those normally accorded anyone of captain's rank.

"From the time I joined the army in January 1952 until the coup," he said, "I was sent all over the country fighting against brother Laotians. The people did not want all this fighting and suffering. I got to the point where I could not tolerate it any longer. I carried out the coup to end the war and end foreign interference in Laos. That is the short answer."

As I pressed for a "longer answer," he filled in some more details, speaking French and English with ease, occasionally searching a precise word from an officer-interpreter.

"In reality, Laotian independence had always been a false independence. First we had the French on our backs, then the Americans. My 2nd Paratroop Battalion, for instance, which carried out the coup, was created by the Americans. It was set up, financed, armed, and trained by them. I knew the Americans wanted to influence me, to have me completely in their pocket. I let them think this was so, I had to hide my own feelings. But I didn't need their influence, I despised it.

"The Americans sent me to Thailand, where I was specially trained as commander of a parachute battalion. The Americans and Phoumi Nosavan had complete confidence in me. Later the Americans showered money on me. I took it and distributed it among the troops. They offered me a very nice civilian car. I said that as I was a military man my

[18] Nouhak Phoumsavan, member of the Central Committee of Neo Lao Haksat.

staff car was sufficient. By every possible means they try and buy up those they think will be faithful servants. In fact they despise our people and our army. The Americans have a 'master race' complex and regard Laotians as inferior people. They wouldn't even drink Laotian water; their drinking water had to be flown in from the Philippines. Ours was good enough for washing in only, they told me."

It was typical of American activities in Southeast Asia that although they had spent over $300,000,000 in Laos over the previous six years — at least $100 per head of the population — they had not bothered to put in a water-filtering plant at the capital. Neither was there any piped water supply in the city, but a vast sum of money had been spent on erecting a monstrous "victory arch" in Vientiane to celebrate General Nosavan's capture of the city in December 1960.

"Our battalion had been set up on New Year's Day, 1958," continued Captain Kong Le. "It was entirely dependent on the Americans. When we went on operations, we didn't even have food of our own. We had to ask the Americans for everything. It was U.S. planes that parachuted food and supplies to us.

"Although I am only a young officer with not much seniority I had fought in almost every populated part of our country. But everywhere, I used my assignments to sound out the opinions of the people, in the towns and in the villages. I was soon convinced that over 90 percent of the people wanted only one thing — peace and an end to foreign interference. They wanted a policy of neutrality. It was what I wanted too, and though contacts with the Pathet Lao I knew this was what they were fighting for. I determined to prepare a coup.

"Everyone in my battalion supported me. All the officers from my own graduation class were with me and many others besides. I was certain of victory. All that was left was to fix the date. As we were quartered only about 12 miles outside Vientien we were favourably placed for action."

On August 8, the Americans ordered the battalion out on a "moping-up" operation against suspected pro-Pathet Lao villages north of Vientiane. Operation orders called for the battalion to pass though the City at 8 P.M. Deciding the moment had come, Kong Le pretended to agree with the plan, but suggested that if 50 truckloads of troops went though the city at that hour, the secrecy of the operation would be given away. He proposed 3 A.M. and this was agreed. U.S. advisers provided money for the operation and allotted the arms, Kong Le said. In their presence, he met all section, platoon, and company chiefs and gave them their orders. "The Americans were convinced I was giving orders for the 'moping-up' operation," he explained. "In fact I was listing the various posts to be seized in Vientiane — General Headquarters, power and radio stations, the arsenal, Police headquarters, etc. I said everything must be in our hands by 3 A.M. No bloodshed if possible — but immediate, energetic action in the case of opposition. The American advisers stood by apparently very satisfied by the eager,

serious way in which the various section leaders received their assignments. These advisers had probably never attended a briefing received with such enthusiasm.

"In every way it was a favorable moment. Nosavan, Somsanith (then prime minister), and other ministers were attending celebrations in Luang Prabang, although I would like to have captured Nosavan. The American advisers were sleeping off their usual Saturday night's wining and dining.

"We had an arrangement with the main military camp at Khinaimo, about 20 miles from Vientiane, for armored support if we needed if for our operations, so we dispatched the First section there to ask for a few tanks and four machine gun carriers for support on the 'moping-up' operation.

"Second section was to arrest the Commander-in-Chief, General Sounthone Pathammavong in his residence. When they arrived, a sentry cried: 'Halt' and then fired, wounding one of our men. They killed him and charged straight at the house. The rest of the guards fled. General Sounthone, in his pyjamas, took one look out of the window and telephoned to the Training Center: 'What are all these parachutists doing in the city?' he asked. One of our men who had just taken over the Center, answered the phone: 'We've just taken over the capital,' he said: 'You'd better surrender.'

"A company occupied the arsenal; everyone there was in pyjamas too. By a few minutes after 3 A.M. everything was in our hands. Total casualties were one of our men wounded, one of theirs killed and two wounded.

"People were very surprised when they started to move about shortly after dawn. But we had leaflets already printed explaining why we had carried out the coup, and setting forth our policy of peace, neutrality, and an end to foreign intervention and corruption. Then there was very quickly tremendous enthusiasm. By afternoon, the streets were filled with demonstrators carrying placards: 'Yanks Go Home,' 'Chase Out the Americans', 'Peace and Unity', 'Relations With the Socialist World'. Messages of support started pouring in from all over the country, including one from underground Central Committee of the Neo Lao Haksat party."

CHAPTER XI: HARD ROAD TO VICTORY IN LAOS

The Rise of Nosavan

During the months that followed the escape of the Pathet Lao battalions in May 1959, there were continuous government crises in Vientiane, each one producing a shift to the Right. General Nosavan's "Committee for Defense of National Interests" (CDNI) made its weight increasingly felt. America's new placemen were challenging old, well-established privileges and were working their way up the political spiral too quickly to suit the liking and material interests of the "old faithful," who tried to hold on from one cabinet reshuffle to the next.

In one of these (December 15, 1959) Sananikone dropped eight CDNI ministers, including Nosavan. Eleven days later tanks appeared on the streets of Vientiane, and truck loads of soldiers unloaded outside the National Assembly. Sananikone took the hint and resigned, but King Savang Vatthana, knowing there was usually no place for a king and a "strong man" in the same country, refused to accept the resignation. When Katay dropped dead on December 29 — at least that was the official version — Sananikone took this as a further hint and refused the King's commission to form another government.

At this point Nosavan, who then held no government post, issued a communique announcing that the army "had taken charge" pending the formation of a new government. This was followed by another communique five days later stating the High Command had informed the King that "in view of the grave situation existing in Laos, the army considered it essential to take charge of current business."

From that moment, whatever name appeared as prime minister, it was "strong man" Nosavan who executed U.S. policies in Laos. To present the sort of legal facade that American policy sometimes needs, general elections were held between April 24 and May 9, 1960. The elections had to be staggered, like Katay's extermination campaign, to permit the concentration of Nosavan's army and police units at various localities. The results were miraculous. The candidates of Neo Lao Haksat and Santiphap Pencan (Peace and Neutrality Party), who had done so well before, did not win a single seat. In some electoral districts where they had won with overwhelming majorities the last time, they did not get a single vote! All seats were won by the Laotian People's Rally (Sananikone's party) and subsidiaries of the CDNI. Barely two weeks after the elections, the 16 Pathet Lao leaders escaped from Vientiane prison and walked to safety half way across Laos without ever being betrayed.

No wonder the United States and its placemen in Laos were caught completely by surprise when Kong Le carried through his military coup. A rubber-stamp government

which had been placed in power two months before the coup came tumbling down. On August 15, 1960, barely a week after Kong Le's battalion occupied Vientiane, the King invited Souvanna Phouma to form a government, which was approved by a thoroughly shaken National Assembly two lays later.

For a while, Nosavan and his CIA advisers were carried away by the strong current of events. At first Nosavan attacked the composition of the new government; in the interests of peace, Souvanna Phouma reshuffled his cabinet on August 30 to include Nosavan as Vice-Premier and Minister of the Interior, Social Welfare and Culture. This government was recognized by most countries of the world, including the United States, as the legal government of Laos. But it was only a stop-gap maneuver while the CIA thought out the next move. It was not long in coming.

Immediately after the investiture of the new government at the Royal capital of Luang Prabang, Nosavan flew south to Savannakhet. There on September 10 Prince Boun Oum announced that, together with Nosavan, he had formed a "New Revolutionary Committee" and that "martial law had been declared throughout the country."

U.S. arms started to pour into Savannakhet from Thailand, and within ten days, Nosavan's troops, reinforced by units of the Thai army, started a push north along the Mekong valley in an attempt to recapture Vientiane. The civil war was on again, this time on a bigger scale than ever. Generals in a number of northern provinces, including Xieng Khouang, Sam Neua, Phong Saly, and Luang Prabang, impressed by the generous scale of U.S. financial and military support for Nosavan, declared their support for him. Among the first results of military action were a stinging defeat inflicted on Nosavan's troops by Kong Le at Paksane, and the occupation of Sam Neua province by the Pathet Lao 2nd Battalion. This was after a sharp battle in which Nosavan lost 2,000 men killed, wounded, and taken prisoner — very big casualties for Laos. The Pathet Lao pursued the remnants into Phong Saly and would have taken over that province too had not the Royal commander had a quick change of heart and declared himself for the Souvanna Phouma government.

Following these two defeats, Nosavan pretended to be in a negotiating mood again until he had built up his forces for another drive to the North. This time in addition to pushing up the Mekong valley, he moved his troops through Thai territory to attack Vientiane from the Thai side of the river. After 18 days of heroic resistance by the forces of Kong Le and the Pathet Lao, helped by the local population to whom Kong Le had distributed the American arms captured during his coup, Vientiane fell, on December 16. It had been heavily shelled from the Thai side of the river, the artillery fire being directed from U.S. helicopters. Boun Oum shifted his Committee there and called it a government. With what seemed indecent haste even to the Western allies, the United States immediately recognized the Boun Oum regime as the only 'legal" government of Laos. The Souvanna Phouma government and its armed forces became "rebels" and the

United States let it be known in no uncertain terms that they were to be wiped out with military and financial means provided by the United States. The facility with which "rebels" became "legal government" and vice-versa was a little too much for some of America's closest allies and for most countries of the world which went on recognizing Souvanna Phouma.

Meanwhile the Neo Lao Haksat had rejoined the Souvanna Phouma government; a decision was taken to establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union and to take economic aid from any country which offered it without conditions. An economic blockade imposed by Thailand to cut off all food and oil from government-held areas was countered by a Soviet air-lift of essential supplies.

It was not a strategic aim to defend Vientiane, situated as it is on the Thai border; possession of the administrative capital could not be decisive for the final outcome. Although they had withdrawn from Vientiane, morale of the Kong Le-Pathet Lao troops was high. They started a 200-mile fighting retreat to hit Nosavan in a place where it really hurt — the Plain of Jars, which dominates all North Laos and into which the Americans had sunk millions of dollars in developing a big network of airfields.

"Our forces," said General Singkapo later, "were pitifully thinly spread out by the time we reached Xieng Khouang [capital of the province of that name and main center in the Plain of Jars]. We had to leave garrisons behind at all strategic points we had captured along the line of withdrawal. Captain Kong Le had only 300 troops by the time we reached Xieng Khouang and we had only one platoon. Most of the rest of both our forces were struggling along, well behind. Transport was difficult, the troops were rather exhausted. But morale was high and we routed Nosavan's troops. By the time all our men had caught up we had about 1,500 altogether. The Plain of Jars was completely in our hands on January 1, 1961. Our old guerilla units started up again in Luang Prabang and other northern provinces nominally under Nosavan's control."

To explain away the massive defeat in the Plain of Jars, Nosavan characteristically invented the myth of "six North Vietnamese battalions," in a note to the UN. This was repeated at two press conferences in Vientiane on January 10 and 23, 1961. But on January 26, a third press conference was held at which, with Boun Oum present, Nosavan's official spokesman admitted there was no evidence of any invasion at all. The protests to the UN and SEATO had been made for reasons of internal propaganda, he admitted. (It was propaganda that had a bad boomerang effect. Nosavan's troops fled in dismay when they heard on Vientiane radio that they had to face "Vietminh" battalions.) On January 4, at a SEATO meeting held at American request in Bangkok, the Thai Secretary-General, Nai Pote Sarasin, had to admit that there was no evidence of active intervention in Laos by North Vietnamese forces and that the presence of invading ground forces would have to be proved before SEATO action could be taken.

In late January, Nosavan launched a major offensive to retake the Plain of Jars, while the American and British governments continued to pour scorn on the idea of an international conference. Nosavan employed 20 battalions, about half his total forces at that time, and from the viewpoint of equipment and training, the best of everything he had. They were supported by numerous commando groups which had been regrouped into battalion-strength units from areas deep in the rear of territory held by Souvanna Phouma.

Throughout February and March the offensive moved on slowly but steadily and the further it went the more specific and haughty were the rejections of proposals for a conference or ceasefire. The type of country made any speedy, spectacular advances difficult in any case, but by the second half of March, guerilla activity was adding to the difficulties. Then, with Souvanna Phouma personally on hand to watch the initial phases, the Kong Le-Pathet Lao forces sprung a counter-offensive. By this time, the Pathet Lao was able to throw its regular forces into the battle; their guerillas struck hard everywhere in the Nosavan rear. There was chaos. Nosavan troops threw away their arms or turned them against their officers. They were fighting in a bad cause, knew this, and showed it.

If Nosavan's offensive had moved forward at a snail's pace, the retreat showed the troops were capable of rapid movement, after all. The elite, trained-in-Thailand units distinguished themselves only by their ability to rush back faster than the others. Nosavan's dream of retaking the Plain of Jars was shattered and more excellent U.S. equipment passed into the hands of the Kong Le and Pathet Lao forces. By mid-April, his troops were chased back further than their jumping-off points — back to within 20 miles each of Luang Prabang and Paksane and 12 miles of Vientiane. The thoroughly demoralized commando battalions disintegrated completely. And in the meantime Pathet Lao guerillas had seized most of lower Laos, occupying among other important points, over 100 miles of the highly strategic Road 9, which leads from Savannakhet to the South Vietnam port of Dong Ha.

The result of that ambitious Nosavan offensive was that a good 70 percent of territory and more than half the population lay behind the Kong Le-Pathet Lao lines. Nosavan held a thin strip along the Mekong river where the main towns are located — and Thailand is conveniently close — and small pockets around Luang Prabang and Vientiane.

The New Ceasefire

In the meantime, U.S. policies in Laos were coming under increasingly severe criticism in the United States itself. Even before Nosavan's shattering defeat, Senator Mike Mansfield on December 28 had complained that there was little to show for the

$300,000,000 spent during the previous six or seven years in Laos, except "chaos, discontent, armies on the loose and a large mission of hundreds of U.S. officials in Vientiane." (Most of them CIA employees.)

A very cheeky reply to the rising tide of criticism, far stronger abroad than at home, was contained in a State Department "White Paper" issued on January 7, on the eve of Nosavan's ill-fated offensive. "The United States believes," it concluded, "that it can best contribute to a solution of the Laos problem: First, by attempting to further international recognition and understanding of the true nature of Communist intentions and actions in Laos." Prince Souvanna Phouma's comment on this was published in the *New York Times*, 12 days later (January 20, 1961). He strongly attacked U.S. policy and especially named Mr. Graham Parsons, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs, as "directly responsible for the recent spilling of Lao blood," and added: "What I shall never forgive the United States for is the fact that it betrayed me; that it double-crossed me and my Government." He pointed out that the United States had consistently opposed the only possible solution, "the formation of a government of national union." He particularly assailed Washington for having procured the downfall of his government in July 1958 in favor of that of Sananikone committed to "strong anti-Communist policies."

Also in the midst of Nosavan's ill-fated attempt to crush the opposition, international pressure was rising again for a peaceful settlement. In December 1960, Prince Sihanouk during a visit to Peking had revived the Soviet proposal of three months before for a new Geneva conference on Laos, and his initiative was supported by the Chinese government. After his return to the Cambodian capital, on January 2, 1961, Prince Sihanouk presented a more detailed proposal. He named the 14 states that he felt should participate in a new Geneva conference; in addition to those which had taken part in 1954 he would include the neighboring states of Laos and the three members of the ICC — India, Poland and Canada. The USSR, China, North Vietnam, Poland, and Burma accepted immediately. Of the Western powers only France gave outright approval. Britain, worried about Nosavan's changes, thought it might be "useful," while President Eisenhower, then serving out his last days in office, neither accepted nor rejected the plan. Nosavan and Boun Oum ridiculed the idea, demanding that the Soviet Union first recognize their government as the only "legal" one, a demand later repeated by Washington as the only basis for talks. In another note to London on February 18, 1961, the USSR renewed its proposals.

Thus, until the full impact of Nosavan's disastrous defeat hit Washington like a sledge hammer, the United States continued to oppose a ceasefire or a conference. By mid-March, with his forces crumbling on every front, Nosavan begged the Americans either to bring about SEATO intervention quickly or save him with a ceasefire. By March 23, the British government, replying to the various notes of the USSR, agreed to an international conference, to reconvening the ICC, and to Prince Sihanouk's proposals for the

composition of the conference. But above all else they wanted a quick ceasefire, to save Nosavan from complete collapse.

On the same day, President Kennedy at his press conference supported the British proposals (the same which had been made repeatedly by the Soviet Union for three years), and he blandly asserted that the United States "strongly and unreservedly supports the goal of a neutral and independent Laos." Nevertheless, later the same day came news that the American aircraft carrier *Midway* and two destroyers had left for the Gulf of Thailand, and on the following day there were reports that several hundred U.S. marines had arrived at Udon Thani airbase, in northern Thailand, about 30 miles from the Laotian frontier.

After a few more diplomatic exchanges between the USSR and Britain, the Co-Chairmen issued a ceasefire appeal on April 24, which was accepted by the forces of Pathet Lao and Kong Le, although they held the advantage everywhere. The ceasefire actually went into effect on May 3, 1961, and the stage was set for a new Geneva conference. The latter was scheduled to open on May 12 but was held up for four days because the U.S. delegation refused to sit down with representatives of the Souvanna Phouma government and the Pathet Lao. Boun Oum and later the Thai delegation refused to take part for the same reason, and it was only on June 27 that a delegation from the Boun Oum-Nosavan government agreed to participate. It was headed by Phoui Sananikone, the same who seven years previously had accepted a million-dollar bribe from the U.S. government not to sign the 1954 Geneva Agreements. The Thai delegation also turned up on June 27.

Month by month, the Geneva conference dragged on while Nosavan, with stepped-up U.S. aid, feverishly tried to rebuild his shattered army and surreptitiously reoccupy key points lost during the February-March fighting. Negotiations continued intermittently through the second half of 1961 and the early months of 1962.

On the Plain of Jars

It was at the end of February 1962 that I paid a visit to Laos to learn how the ceasefire and the proposals for a coalition government were working out. As my plane started to descend toward the Plain of Jars, I noticed a heavy smudge of smoke hanging over the trees. Obviously the mountain people clearing a "ray," I thought. But my neighbor, a young Laotian engineer, peered intently through the window and said bitterly: "That's Nosavan's commandos at work. The Americans drop them in the mountains." As we came closer and lower, we could see a cluster of huts enveloped in dusky, red flames.

Zooming down on to the Plain, one could easily mistake the origin of the name. The valley itself and the undulating bare hills which fringe it are covered with large white patches, shaped like narrow-necked jars, laid out as far as you can see in any direction.

In fact these growths are sticky traps for any birds or small animals imprudent enough to set foot in them. The name of the Plain comes from the real jars, huge gray stone affairs, ranging from three to eight feet in height and ranged together in strips a mile or so long and several jars wide. If they were to hold wine for special ceremonies, as some experts maintain, the people of that day must have been prodigious drinkers and the Plain the scene of some fantastic orgies. Other specialists claim they were for rice reserves in time of war, others again that they had purely religious significance. In any case, they are a very curious phenomenon, some hacked out of solid pieces of stone, others formed of a powdered stone and cement-like compound.

An hour before the plane touched down another had landed bringing Souvanna Phouma back from Vientiane, where he had made one more fruitless effort in talks with "strong man" Nosavan to set up the coalition government in accordance with agreements signed during previous months.

The Vientiane visit had been arranged by the British and French ambassadors, who had assured Souvanna Phouma that the Americans were now "reasonable" and would accept the neutral coalition government. If he came to Vientiane and talked things over with Nosavan, all would be well. As things turned out, Souvanna Phouma was not met at the Vientiane airport. He had to go looking for a hotel room like an unexpected tourist, since his own villa had been sacked. He was kept waiting by Nosavan for several days while the U.S. ambassador conducted a war of nerves, threatening SEATO intervention if a government were not formed quickly and "advising" the prime minister to cede the ministries of Defense and the Interior to Nosavan. And these were the first demands presented by Nosavan when they met.

Kong Le, cheerful and energetic, was even more categoric than the Prince. "The main obstacle to forming the coalition government is the bad faith of Nosavan, his Savannakhet group of generals and their American backers," he said. "They still have illusions that they can win militarily and they try to force us into concessions that would amount to surrender terms, by threatening to bring in SEATO forces."

At this time, Washington was pretending to pressure Nosavan into accepting a coalition government by withholding $5,000,000, its monthly payment to the Boun Oum regime. I found no one in Khang Khay believed this. I asked acting premier Khamsouk Keola about it. He laughed: "It's just a ruse. The Americans give extra money to Sanit Thanarat, the Thai dictator who is Nosavan's uncle, and he just passes it on. If the Americans want to put on real pressure, why don't they cut arms supplies?" The same point had been made a few days previously in the *New York Times* (February 22), by its Vientiane correspondent, Jacques Nevard. "Washington's backing of both Prince Souvanna Phouma and General Phoumi Nosavan is viewed by some British, French and Canadian diplomats as a two-faced policy," he wrote. After mentioning U.S. withdrawal of financial aid from Boun Oum, Nevard continued:

> However, the United States has continued its military aid to General Phoumi Nosavan's forces. Weapons, ammunition and fuel have not been cut off. An airlift chartered from the Chinese Nationalists still functions. Uniformed teams of United States military advisers continue to serve with most of General Phoumi Nosavan's battalions in the field. ... The general has placed more obstacles in the way of a coalition regime than any other leader in the country."

Also replying to my questions on this point, Prince Souphanouvang said: "All I know is that U.S. military aid to Thailand has been doubled since the ceasefire agreements were signed. Why? Is Thailand at war? Deliveries include jet planes. Why? Either to help carry on an existing war or to start a new one."

"I have signed three agreements with Boun Oum and Nosavan," he continued, "which provide for setting up a coalition government under Prince Souvanna Phouma. All I ask is that they honor their signatures. Now the Americans say they are ready to support a neutral government. We see no neutral attitude from them, only aggression."

The three agreements to which he referred were within the framework of the general ceasefire pacts, but were in effect used by Nosavan as time-wasting devices to enable him to prepare for new offensives. The first, at Zurich (June 22, 1961) was an agreement between the three princes — Souvanna Phouma, Souphanouvong, and Boun Oum — to form a provisional government of national union. At another meeting between the three princes (Hin Heup, October 6-8, 1961), it was agreed that Prince Souvanna Phouma would be prime minister of a coalition government consisting of eight neutral members, four supporters of Souphanouvong and four of Boun Oum. The third agreement, signed at Geneva (January 19, 1962), allotted specific cabinet posts, but it was repudiated by Nosavan, the real power behind Boun Oum, within 48 hours. Small wonder that the two Princes and others at Khang Khay were wary of further traps.

In confirmation of these suspicions was a despatch to the London *Times* on May 24 from its Washington correspondent. Headed, "CIA is Blamed for Laos Crisis," the despatch reads in part:

> The Administration is now convinced that the Central Intelligence Agency has been up to its old devices again and must share a large part of the responsibility for the situation in Laos... Apparently the evidence shows that the swarm of CIA agents in Laos deliberately opposed the official American objective of trying to establish a neutral government. They are believed to have encouraged General Phoumi Nosavan in the concentration of troops that brought about the swift and disastrous response from the Pathet Lao.

As for the farce of the stopped pay-cheque, the despatch continues, "the CIA provided them with funds from its own capacious budget. The belief is that the agency transferred the money from its operations in Siam." The attempt to prove that the CIA has one policy and the Administration another is wearing a bit thin. The only U.S. policy the world sees

in action is the CIA policy. In any case, the *Times* despatch confirmed everything one could learn on the spot in Laos.

I sought the help of General Kong Le and General Singkapo, who head the Joint Supreme Military Council, to get a picture of what had happened in Laos since the ceasefire agreement. I wanted to see the agreed ceasefire line on a map and was surprised to learn that none existed.

"Nosavan simply walked out of the Na Mone conference which was to pinpoint the ceasefire line and never came back," said General Singkapo. "Apparently he could not accept the realities of the military situation." His own map was marked with the red ceasefire line his side had submitted at the conference and which French military experts later told me coincided with their own. At that time about 70 percent of the territory was under the administration of the Souvanna Phouma government. Shaded areas enclosed with blue lines showed the areas retaken by the Nosavan forces since the ceasefire. They were extensive, about 1,800 square miles.

The two generals said that in December 1961 and January and February 1962, Nosavan's forces had launched three major offensives. According to Nosavan officers who came over to their side, the operational plans were drawn up by MAAG (U.S. Military Aid and Advisory Group) at Vientiane. Thirty-three battalions, about two-thirds of Nosavan's total forces, were employed. By early March, the Nosavan forces had suffered severe defeats again.

In the North, at the time I was there, the Nosavan forces faced disaster. Since January, they had pushed 70 miles behind the ceasefire line to capture Nam Mo, Nam Seo, and Muong Houn. Then the Kong Le and Pathet Lao troops recaptured the towns and chased the attackers back. Nosavan, no great strategist, ordered his retreating troops into a valley about ten miles east of Nam Tha. A glance at the military map showed all the best of Nosavan's forces bottled up in a Dien Bien Phu situation, and almost all of the U.S. supply resources tied up, feeding them. That was the situation in early March 1962 when I was there — 7,000 of Nosavan's elite troops, surrounded in a valley on the Souvanna Phouma side of the ceasefire line, an important proportion of his total fighting strength. After all, it was the loss of only 16,000 elite French troops at Dien Bien Phu that caused the collapse of their whole military effort in Indo-China.

The situation had not changed two months later. Nosavan's troops got hungrier, colder, sicker. They were being air-supplied from a forward airfield at Muong Sin, about 60 miles away. Early in May, Nosavan's garrison at Muong Sin revolted. Troops were despatched by air to quell the revolt. The first plane was surrounded when it landed. Some decided to join the revolt. The others were killed or captured and the plane set on fire. No other planes landed. This was the final blow. The encircled troops at Nam Tha made an all-out desperate effort to break out; forces sent to their relief by Nosavan were

cut to pieces. Those who succeeded in breaking out, never stopped running until they had got to the Mekong, and across it into Thailand.

That is the real story of Nam Tha, a situation of U.S. making which was presented upside down to the world as a "Pathet Lao" violation of the ceasefire agreements and practically a *causus belli* for a new world war. It was turned into the pretext for the American military occupation of Thailand, bringing Southeast Asia that much nearer to war.

As for Laotian "threats" to Thailand, the boot was on the other foot when I was in Laos. I was given the designations and garrison locations of 14 battalions of Thai, South Vietnamese, Chiang Kai-shek, and Philippine forces. There were about 2,000 U.S. military "advisers" planning and supervising operations — unsuccessfully, it must be admitted — controlling artillery, engineering, communications, and armored units, even providing drivers and gunners in the latter case. It was not Thailand that was threatened by Laotians, or even Laotians threatened by Loatians. Laos was the object of an international, armed invasion organized by the United States.

After the London *Times* report on CIA sabotage in Laos, Washington announced it was conducting an official inquiry into CIA activities there. It might well start its investigations with documents left behind in the helter-skelter flight from Nam Tha. These are now in the hands of the Souvanna Phouma government, and include Directive No. 944, signed on August 20, 1961, by General Rattikone, Commander of Nosavan's forces — that is, three and one-half months after the ceasefire which it describes as a "purely theoretical factor." Also Washington might study army operational order No. 1438, signed by Rattikone on November 25, 1961, setting out the plan for an offensive into Souvanna Phouma territory beyond Nam Tha and Muong Sai. These were plans drawn up for Nosavan by his U.S. "advisers," presumably responsible to the Pentagon and not only to the CIA.

While I was in Laos, it was possible to witness other forms of violations. I personally saw an American transport plane, escorted by six careening jet fighters, drop a score or more parachuters on a mountain ridge within 15 miles of Souvanna Phouma's capital. Almost every night you could hear planes droning overhead on dropping missions, men or supplies or both. One was shot down about 12 miles from Xieng Khou-ang town a couple of weeks before my arrival.

One day when I visited the Xieng Khouang market — normally a bustling, colorful place with the minority people in gay, embroidered costumes exchanging their forest products for goods from the planes — there was an unusual hush and gloom. I found that three Meo women coming down their mountain trail to the market that morning had been killed by a mine, laid on the path by one of Nosavan's airdropped commandos. To disrupt normal life in the rear areas is one of their main aims, the governor of Xieng Khouang province assured me.

Everyone I met in Laos, from Souvanna Phouma to the minority people in the market places, from Kong Le's troops in their red berets and camouflage uniforms to Pathet Lao partisans, from fishermen with their throwing nets to young students who had dropped their studies in France to take up a rifle with Kong Le — all of them wanted the war to end. But they were not prepared to accept continued foreign domination of their country, nor the sort of solution that would accept as the price of immediate peace, the certainty of renewed war in the future. Absurd demands, supported for so long by the Americans, to put the ministries of Defense and the Interior into Nosavan's hands in any coalition government would have been the surest guarantee of renewed war and a repetition of the 1958-60 attempts to liquidate the Pathet Lao and its leaders.

The Government of National Coalition

After the destruction of the "strong man's" forces at Nam Tha, events moved forward to the actual formation on June 12, 1962, of a government of national coalition in which the key posts were in the hands of the Souvanna Phouma neutrals, some minor ones for the Vientiane neutrals (whose "neutrality" is of a dubious hue, according to my informants), and the rest divided equally between Neo Lao Haksat and Nosavan. The Neo Lao Haksat, in view of the major role they played in defeating Nosavan and their long record of sacrifice and struggle for the real independence of their country, were extremely modest in accepting parity with Nosavan.

In the new government, Prince Souvanna Phouma, in addition to the premiership, held the posts of Defense and Social Action; Prince Souphanouvong became deputy prime minister with the portfolios of Economy and Planning; Nosavan also became a deputy prime minister and minister of Finance. Foreign Affairs and the Interior went to Quinim Pholsena and Pheng Phongsavan, respectively, of the Souvanna Phouma neutralists; the Neo Lao Haksat also received the ministries of Information, Propaganda and Tourism (Phoumi Vongvichit); Secretary of State for Economy and Planning (Phamphouane Khamphoue), and Secretary of State for Public Works and Transport (Tiao Souk Vongsak).

It was a matter of general rejoicing — except for Nosavan and the CIA — when the last signature was affixed. But this soon gave way to caution again, when it was learned that U.S planes were still parachuting arms and supplies to commando groups and when Nosavan tried to hold off the application of the agreements by claiming that they would have to be approved by the very National Assembly which his troops and police had set up in 1960. Even more ominous, there were indications that an old plot to detach lower Laos might be revived. On the eve of the June 12 agreement, hints appeared in the American press that the United States was considering occupation of South Laos to secure a 'corridor' between Thailand and South Vietnam in order to establish a single

military command in the three countries. All this added to the difficulties of getting the new government actually to function.

The initial meeting of the new coalition government under Prince Souvanna Phouma was held on June 24, 1962, and one of its first acts was to order the immediate cessation of all military activity throughout the country. This paved the way for the resumption of the Geneva conference on July 2. Three documents were finally approved: a Statement by the Laotian government affirming its policy of strict neutrality and peaceful co-existence, a Declaration by the 13 other participating governments welcoming and guaranteeing to respect Laotian neutrality, and an explanatory Protocol. These documents are very specific, spelling out in clear and precise terms the obligations of the Laotian government and the other states.

The most important points in the eight-point Laotian Declaration can be summarized as follows:

(1) The Laotian government will resolutely apply the five principles of peaceful coexistence in foreign relations, and will establish friendly relations and develop diplomatic relations with all countries, the neighboring countries first and foremost, on the basis of equality and of respect for the independence and sovereignty of Laos.

(4) It will not enter into any military alliance or into any agreement, whether military or otherwise, which is inconsistent with the neutrality of the kingdom of Laos. It will not allow the establishment of any foreign military base on Laotian territory, nor allow any country to use Laotian territory for military purposes or for purposes of interference in the internal affairs of other countries, nor recognize the protection of any alliance of military coalition (including the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation).

(5) It will not allow any foreign interference in the internal affairs of the Kingdom of Laos in any form whatsoever.

(6) Subject to the provisions of Article 5[19] of the Protocol, it will require the withdrawal from Laos of all foreign troops and military personnel and will not allow any foreign troops or military personnel to be introduced into Laos.

(7) It will accept direct and unconditional aid from all countries that wish to help build up an independent and autonomous national economy on the basis of respect for the sovereignty of Laos.

The four-point Declaration of the countries participating in the Geneva conference obliged them to:

(1) Recognize and respect and observe in every way the sovereignty, independence, neutrality, unity, or territorial integrity of Laos.

[19] Article 5 of the Protocol retains a provision of the original 1954 Geneva Agreements for a strictly limited number of French military instructors for training the Laotian armed forces

(2) Never employ force or the threat of force, or commit or participate in any act which might directly or indirectly impair the sovereignty, independence, neutrality, unity or territorial integrity, or might impair the peace of Laos. Not to interfere in any way in her internal affairs nor to use her territory to interfere in the internal affairs of other countries, nor invite or encourage her to enter into any military or other alliances inconsistent with her neutrality.

(3 and 4) Encourage other states to respect these provisions and enter joint consultations in the event of a violation or threat of violation of the independence and neutrality of Laos.

A Protocol of 20 Articles defined various terms used in the preceding documents; provided for the withdrawal of foreign military personnel, and laid down the competence and functions of the International Commission for Supervision and Control.

These documents and the events that preceded them represent a very considerable defeat for U.S. policy in Southeast Asia. They are a victory for the progressive and neutralist forces. The Pathet Lao, later joined by Captain Kong Le and the neutralists of Souvanna Phouma, for seven years fought back the U.S.-supported attacks against them, never missing a chance to negotiate for a peaceful solution. The initiative for peace within the country always came from them, and they succeeded in rallying the support of the overwhelming majority of the people. Similarly on the diplomatic front, North Vietnam and China again and again initiated proposals to end the civil war and prevent its spreading. The main diplomatic burden fell on the Soviet Union, which combined a policy of unequivocal firmness against aggression with constant efforts to promote peaceful solutions.

The United States was forced into the agreements which ended the Laos crisis in 1962. As long as their "man in the field" had any chance of victory — and long after it was clear even that he had no chance — the United States supported him in every way. Finally, the Americans accepted a face-saving retreat by way of the Geneva Conference only when Nosavan was finally beaten and his armed forces became the laughing stock of the world, only when the Soviet Union warned that the use of outside force would be met with "retaliatory force," only after France and later Britain had refused to go along with any SEATO adventures.

The role of Britain was almost as bad, worse at times because of her special responsibilities as a Co-Chairman of the 1954 Geneva Conference. As long as there was any chance of Washington's placemen winning, Britain turned a deaf ear to all Soviet peace initiatives, even the mildest proposals, such as reconvening the ICC. It was only when British diplomatic and military observers on the spot saw that Nosavan and Boun Oum were politically and militarily bankrupt and when the British government foresaw American pressure to involve Britain as a SEATO member in a wider conflict that she began to show a cautious interest in the repeated Soviet proposals.

If the coalition government does settle down — and the presence in it of Nosavan justifies much caution — one of the tragedies is that such a government could have been formed any time during the previous eight years. Such governments (excluding a Nosavan) were formed in fact on several occasions and functioned satisfactorily. Much Laotian blood was spilt by the American attempts to overthrow them. A question in everyone's mind now is whether the United States is at last prepared to permit the Laotian people to shape their own future, or whether the 1962 Geneva Agreements are regarded in Washington only as a means to gain time for fresh outrages in this corner of the world.

POSTSCRIPT

May 1, 1963

Laos

Any illusions that the formation of the coalition government in Laos would, by itself, bring a stable peace were shattered by the events of April 1963. The author paid another visit to Southeast Asia at that time and gathered more firsthand evidence of the hot-cold war continuing there. It was soon evident that the Rightist group, headed by General Phoumi Nosavan, had been far more successful in peacetime intrigues than it had been on the battlefield.

From the moment the coalition government was formed and actually started functioning in Vientiane, U.S.-Nosavan policy, backed by swarms of CIA agents, was to win the neutralists away from the Pathet Lao, isolating the latter as a prelude to destroying them. What almost happened in Vientiane in mid-April was an Iraqian-type coup, as a climax to months of intrigue, bribery, and a succession of assassinations. The plan of winning away the neutralists, breaking up the partnership which had thwarted early efforts to destroy the Pathet Lao, was not merely a political move aimed at forming some future electoral alliance. It had specific military aims — to introduce a Trojan horse into key military areas and take them from within. A scandalous situation existed, with Nosavan's troops and police in complete control of Vientiane. Government, Pathet Lao, and neutralist leaders were virtually hostages of Nosavan's armed forces. In this situation a coup was planned in which certain neutralist and Pathet Lao leaders were to have been assassinated.

The murder of Foreign Minister Quinim Pholsena on April 1 was the signal for an armed coup, the first stage of which was to be the seizure of the strategic Plain of Jars.

In the previous months, there had been a mysterious series of "desertions" to the forces of General Kong Le from Nosavan's regular army. They did not come in two's and three's, but in entire companies complete with arms and officers. A number of senior Nosavan officers also "deserted" to Kong Le's staff headquarters. When the Pathet Lao leader, Prince Souphanouvong, warned Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma and Kong Le of what was happening, the warnings were dismissed as the product of an "over-suspicious mind." There is every reason to believe that in the period just preceding the April events, Kong Le was figuratively, if not literally, a prisoner of the Nosavan infiltrationists. Orders were given in Kong Le's name for certain units to be switched from key points in the Plain of Jars and to be replaced by others which were virtually Nosavan's men in Kong Le uniforms. Colonel Deuane, Kong Le's number two officer, and

military commander in the Plain of Jars, refused, aware by then of what was happening. That was late in March.

On April 1 Quinim Pholsena, head of the "Peace and Neutrality" party, comprising progressive forces among the neutralists, was shot down as he walked up the steps of his Vientiane home after attending a Royal reception. His wife, a political figure in her own right, severely wounded in the assassination, told me a few days later that she had no doubt the murderers were inspired by Americans in Laos. She was left to bleed to death on the steps alongside her husband's body; the guard which surrounded the house prevented anyone entering or leaving to get help. No one from the guard came near her. Eventually, a servant dragged her inside. Those who tried to enter were stopped at gun-point, including Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma and the Pathet Lao Minister of Information, Phoumi Vongvichit, and other ministers. It was only three hours after the shooting that Souvanna Phouma was permitted to enter the house and only five hours later was Madame Pholsena taken to a hospital. (As for the assassin, who made no attempt to flee, he was taken to live with a high-ranking neutralist cabinet member and only 12 days later was he nominally arrested and put in a prison controlled by Nosavan's forces!)

A few hours after the assassination, troops supported by tanks were sent to arrest or kill Col. Deuane. They were beaten off, part of the forces refusing to attack. A second much larger assault was made the following day, supported by seven tanks. The troops, supporting peace and neutrality with their feet, either refused to attack or deserted to Col. Deuane. Seeing what was happening, neutralist troops in other key areas declared themselves also for Col. Deuane and for upholding the partnership with the Pathet Lao.

From Kong Le's headquarters, appeals went to Nosavan for reinforcements — this time not "deserters" but entire units of battalion strength. By the second and third week of April, Nosavan's battalions started moving up towards the Plain of Jars, the gates opened for them in some places by the infiltrators among Kong Le's troops. It was only when key points were actually under attack, that the Pathet Lao moved to help Col. Deuane defend the Plain of Jars. As usual in such encounters, Nosavan's forces were beaten back at every point, except one important post at Tha Thom, a southern gateway to the Plain of Jars where some 800 Nosavan men overwhelmed a small Pathet Lao garrison.

In the meantime, the two Pathet Lao ministers, Prince Souphanouvong and Phoumi Vongvichit, managed to escape from the trap set for them in Vientiane, the former withdrawing to Khong Khay in the Plain of Jars and the latter to the old resistance base at Sam Neua. The military plot failed due to the loyalty of Col. Deuane and the main part of the neutralist forces in the Plain of Jars to their partnership with the Pathet Lao; to the reluctance of the Kong Le troops to attack their colleagues; to the vigilance of the Pathet Lao, and to the low morale of Nosavan's forces. But it was a close call. Had "Operation

Trojan Horse" succeeded, the trap would have been sprung in Vientiane and all Pathet Lao and progressive neutralist forces in the capital would have been caught in it.

As it was, the assassination of Pholsena was the signal for a brutal assault on progressives. With tanks and armored cars patrolling the Vientiane streets, scores of progressives were hunted down and arrested; others saved themselves only by seeking asylum in friendly embassies.

Western embassies and the wire agencies went into action, describing the fighting as Pathet Lao "aggression" and "violation" of the ceasefire — long before the Pathet Lao had even fired a shot in self-defense. As usual in such cases, the U.S. Fleet moved into the Gulf of Thailand, and the failure of the plot was pictured as a threat to world peace.

These events have shown again that the U.S. State Department and the CIA have no intention of accepting defeat for their policies in Laos, not even the stabilization of a neutral government. The recent growth of popular sentiment in Thailand and South Vietnam for neutral regimes in those countries also, confronts the Kennedy administration with a new crisis of policy, which it cannot meet merely by trying to prove with more intervention and intrigue that neutral regimes in Asia are unworkable.

More troubles can be expected in Laos, as long as the Nosavan Rightists, with the support of the United States, do everything possible to prevent stability. Side by side with this, there are indications that the old plan is being revived of setting up a separate state in South Laos under the guise of "partition." This would provide the United States with a corridor between Thailand and South Vietnam, and with one single front within which troops could be shuttled back and forth as the requirements of counter-revolution may demand. The new element in the plan is to create, side by side with the southern corridor, a U.S.-supported "neutralist" regime centered in the Plain of Jars in the North.

South Vietnam

In South Vietnam, the situation continues to move drastically against the Diemist regime. The failures of U.S. intervention against the forces of the National Liberation Front account to a great measure for the more desperate policies in Laos.

The Staley Plan to wipe out the guerillas in South Vietnam within 18 months has failed. During my travels in April 1963, I met one of the military leaders of the NLF, who must remain nameless for the time. He analyzed the situation as follows:

"The Americans based their plans to wipe us out in 18 months on the following factors: When intervention started at the end of 1961, they figured they had a numerical superiority of Diemist troops over ours of 10 to 1. They hoped to increase this advantage to 20 to 1 by the end of 1962. According to British experience in Malaya, they believed this would be sufficient to end resistance quickly — say in another six months. [Actually, political and military conditions in Malaya were quite different and even with a 40 to 1

superiority at the end, the British had no clear military victory.] American calculations were based on increasing the Diemist military forces to certain target figures and reducing our forces to well below the 1961 levels. Opposition to conscription in the South and large-scale desertions prevented them from achieving their expansion targets. Instead of our forces being reduced, they were doubled by the end of 1962. Thus, instead of achieving a 20 to 1 superiority, the original 10 to 1 proportion was reduced to something between 6 and 7 to 1. And the ratio will continue to change in favor of the NLF forces."

He added with complete confidence, "At present 75 percent of the territory of South Vietnam is entirely liberated. It includes about 7,000,000 inhabitants, half the population. Land reform has been carried out, and in much of the area irrigation projects have made possible two crops instead of one each year. There is a school and public health center in each village and in many districts we already have secondary schools. Outside the solidly liberated territory, we control much of the territory by night while the Diemist administration appears to function by day."

In other words, the struggle in South Vietnam is assuming the classic form it has taken wherever a guerilla war developed into a successful war of independence, be it Algeria or Cuba. Beginning with an overwhelming superiority in favor of the Right-wing and colonialist forces, the ratio constantly changes in favor of the resistance forces until a sort of equality is approached, followed by a sudden collapse of the Rightists. Outside support is powerless to change this. U.S. forces in South Vietnam already exceed 12,000 men, and new weapons are constantly being added, including helicopters with more fire-power than any fighter plane of World War II, amphibious troop carriers, new types of small arms, and rockets. But in the first days of 1963, defeats were already so severe, including mounting American casualties, that President Kennedy demanded a special report from Mr. McNamara. These costly defeats have continued to mount. Nor are American arms and dollars capable of squeezing out a big expansion in Diem's forces, who are obviously unwilling to fight.

Direct U.S. military participation, even with forces of division strength, cannot bring about a reversal of the changing ratio. On the other hand, the resistance forces could be doubled or even quintupled in a short time because they spring from the people defending their own hearths and families. The inexorable logic of the people's war has caught up with Diem and his American backers. The United States is now faced with a choice between facing a straight-out defeat or seeking a negotiated withdrawal.

It is therefore no suprise that by April 1963 Washington was already making soundings — either directly or through British, French, Indian and other channels — for the kind of formula under which an "honorable" withdrawal could be negotiated. But as in Laos, Washington was seeking a formula which would provide gains through diplomacy or intrigue that could not be obtained on the battlefield. Thus the favorite

formula being offered by Washington's agents in April 1963 was a form of "neutralization" of South Vietnam which would admit some NLF elements into a Diemist-type regime in the South (although without Diem himself), in exchange for the "neutralization" of the North, guaranteed by the presence of some Diemists in the government of North Vietnam. Other variants, always including "neutralization" of the North, envision a coalition government in the South formed by Diemist elements on the Right, some members of the NLF on the Left, and some liberal Vietnamese exiles in Paris to provide the "neutralist" filling. Again, Diem himself is to be excluded, as all but the most die-hard U.S. diplomats agree he is impossible.

The fact that such schemes are being offered within little over a year of direct U.S. intervention is a measure of the frustration of U.S. policies in South Vietnam. Meanwhile, the NLF leadership does not see in these schemes any evidence that Washington now wants a realistically negotiated settlement. They are prepared to continue the resistance struggle until the United States finds it necessary to negotiate seriously for withdrawal.

Index not transcribed.