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article 4 of 7-article series

page 3

May 19, 1965

THE MONOPOLY GAME

SAIGON--In 1962, as American advisors and Helicopters first arrived en masse on Viet Nam, President Ngo Dinh Diem was told by a close American friend that unless he radically reformed his government, he would undoubtedly be overthrown by a coup d'etat. The American had simply taken a poll of Diem's former supporters and found that of more than 150, only 30 were still sticking with the chubby little mandarin.

"But Diem would't listen and the American weren't interested in hearing it," the American lamented. "More American troops and helicopters came; but reform did not. The Americans built a beautiful war machine and placed it on political quicksand."

Despite the American military built-up, the lack of reform by Diem provided the political fuel on which Viet Cong strength mushroomed.

More than a year later, Diem was overthrown.

Diem had built a political Maginot Line for political trench warfare with the Communists. On one side of the line was the Communist ideology, the National Liberation Front and the cloakied behind the Front, the Communist Party called People's Revolutionary Party.

deeps

article 4 of 7 article series

page 2

Bien had built his own counter-ideology, his vague concept called Personalism; his National Revolutionary Movement corresponded to the National Liberation Front; his brothers secret party, the Can Lao, corresponded to Communist Party.

When Bien was overthrown, his counter-ideology and counter-machines were washed away. Since then, no one smart person has been in total command of the anti-Communist sector long enough to build a similar machine or ideology.

Since then, the country has been in a conspicuous state of political crisis. Sources in Saigon now argue that it would be a mistake to re-build a counter-ideology—even if it could be done—but that instead the Saigon government must now reform itself and "out-revolutionise the Communists—but do it ten times better and 50 times faster than the Communists themselves."

The last time the American-backed Saigon government seized the political initiative was with the strategic hamlet program. The concept of fortified hamlets, with announced dramatic economic and social advantages, was officially launched by Bien in April, 1962.

But it was doomed before it started. One American, who speaks fluent Vietnamese, had visited a pilot project in Guchi, only 20 miles from Saigon, where the peasants told him that the hamlet program, instead of being an economic revolution, was an economic disaster.

deeps

series--article 4 of 7 article series

page 3

The peasants said the government forced them to construct hamlets instead of working on their cash crop of tobacco; they could produce only 10 per cent of what normally raised. They were forced to cut their bamboo trees,--their cushion crop,--for the construction defense stakes and fences. A leading American general was told this by the American, he replied stiffly "Thank you"

The plan was cast; neither the American command nor Dien would make any reforms or revisions in it. The program virtually crumbled when Dien was overthrown the Viet Cong swiped the concept and implemented their own in "combat hamlet" program.

The dilemma of American policymakers is the schizo-phrenic nature of the Vietnamese society itself. The governing class is generally urban-based, French-educated with an aristocratic position based on either family background, money or landowning. This elite minority attempts to govern the masses in rural areas and cities about which it knows little and is concerned less. "There's a time gap of centuries between our two societies," one Vietnamese intellectual explained. "There's the Republic of Viet Nam and the Republic of Saigon--and the two never meet."

deeps

series--article 4 of 7 article series

page 4

The lack of concern and compassion by the elite minority was illustrated by the wife of a Western embassy official. The wives of embassy officials had voluntarily presented furniture, ^{clothing} ~~clothing~~ and toys to a local orphanage.

"Several days after we handed over the goods, one of the embassy wives returned to the orphanage," the lady explained. "We were astonished to find the officials had even taken the toys out of the hands of little orphans. The toys were nowhere to be found."

In contrast, cadres wanting to join Communist Party are sent to the live with the rural masses and practice "three-togetherness"; eating, living and working with the peasants. Cadres are invited to join the Communist Party--which has an exclusive, and not mass, membership--when they are prepared to govern.

"The Americans had to play with the cards that were dealt out and they weren't very good cards," one Western diplomat explained. "In Vietnam, nationalists went the Communist way. We saw alot of Vietnamese in the South that are the political forces in the country...they are the bourgeois, the landowners, the Catholics. They believe in the same ideas as we do; we support these people and they us. But these people in an Asian country in the throes of political-social upheaval--they are not in the mainstream."

deeps

series--article 4 of 7 article series

page 5

They're on the edges--we're supporting them and the mainstream is elsewhere--in the nationalist movement of the Communists. The mainstream elements got into the hands of Ho Chi Minh in North Viet Nam and Mao Tse-Tung in China. Chiang Kai Shek didn't have the nationalist issue; he was helped by the United States--and this in turn made it more likely he'd lose."

An example of the lack of justice and the lack of equal opportunity is perhaps best reflected in the medical profession in Vietnam, which one American-educated Vietnamese doctor called "The Medical Mafia." Two elite groups of doctors--the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Saigon and the private organization called the Medical Syndicate--decide which doctors will be licensed for private practice. Virtually all the members vote groups come from Hanoi and favor licensing only northerners.

"These seven older-generation men in the Faculty of Medicine are capable and dedicated," one American official working in medical field explained. "They just happen to be partisan. They represent the old Mandarin system; they choose, select--and limit the leaders of the future. It's the tradition in the East for more than 1000 years that leaders of the next generation are always chosen by those in power. This gives rise to the mandarin system and an-un-do amount of nepotism."

deeps

series--article 4 of 7 article series

page 6

The young students are in revolt against this phase of their culture--that's why they demonstrate on the streets of Saigon. We have difficulty placing a definitely our U.S. educated medical students if they aren't chosen by this elite leadership; so American aid is re-enforcing the corruption & nepotism--and financing it."

After a presence of 10 years,--and administering the largest USAID medical program in the west--American officials here still have little influence on Vietnamese medical ~~offices~~. One American-trained Vietnamese doctor said that a medical degree from American medical school still is readily recognized in Viet Nam, ~~as it is~~, while on the other hand a "parachute degree"--a degree that is virtually bought with money from a second-rate medical school in France--is easily acceptable by the "The Mafia."

"Everyone in Saigon knows that medical graduates from American institutions get the inferior jobs," one American official working in the medical field explained.

One Vietnamese medical specialist returned to Vietnam late 1958 with a medical degree and professional license from first-rate American medical school. He brought with him surgical equipment ~~from~~ from the United States which he would use once he set up his own practice.

scope

series--article 4 of 7 article series

page 7

The Customs department said it was illegal to bring in the equipment; that he would have to take out an import license--which would take one year. Despite intervention of American friends, he sent the equipment back to America and started the difficult task of getting the necessary license to practice in Viet Nam. There was had but one other practicing specialist in his field. But he was consistently chuffed from office to office; as the time passed before his licensing, he began charity work without fees to help persons who otherwise could not be cured. The Medical Syndicate called him in; reprimanded him sharply for practicing illegally and threatened if he did not stop he would be sent to jail. He stopped; but his charity patients--more than 80 of them--then threatened to demonstrate on the streets of Saigon, waving banners in protest. He asked them not to do so. More than two years after his arrival in Saigon, he still has not been licensed--and has no patients in a country where disease is prevalent. He's talking of going to Fiji Island to do missionary work.

"We are the forgotten young man," he explained.

"We are never counted by the Mafia."

deeps

series--article 4 of 7 article series

page 8

The two best hospitals in Saigon are French operated--they are also the most expensive; there is no good American hospital in Saigon for the Vietnamese population (although in France there are two American-operated hospitals in France). Requests by the American-operated Seven Day Adventist Missionary Hospital to expand their 30-bed clinic have repeatedly been refused; western doctors practicing there have ~~experienced~~ also frequently had difficulty in getting licenses to practice in Viet Nam.

American officials in Saigon have not effectively pressured the Saigon government to correct "this rot within," in the words of a Vietnamese anti-Communist; instead they have superimposed upon "the rot" a spectacular medical program in the provinces, which will be discussed later.

"The Americans think we should fight for democracy," one young Vietnamese intellectual explained. "But in fact the Viet Cong fight because of the lack of democracy."