

How the U. S. Built On the Quicksand Of Asian Politics

In South Viet Nam today, the choice seems to lie between democratic social change and Communist revolution. But the rigidly stratified Vietnamese society so far has been unwilling or unable to produce an imaginative program of political reform that might meet the popular demand for change. In this fourth article of a six-part series, the Herald Tribune's Beverly Deepe tells how the traditional system works—or fails to work—in such diverse fields as medical training and distribution of children's toys.

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SAIGON.

In 1962, when American advisers and helicopters began arriving in large numbers in Viet Nam, President Ngo Dinh Diem was told by a close American friend that unless he radically reformed his government, he undoubtedly would be overthrown in a coup d'etat. The American had taken a poll of Diem's former supporters and found that only 30 out of 150 were sticking with the chubby little mandarin.

"But Diem wouldn't listen and the Americans weren't interested in hearing it," the friend 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 build-up, the failure of President Diem to institute reforms provided the political fuel on which Viet Cong strength grew.

A year later, President Diem was overthrown and killed.

President Diem had built a political Maginot Line for political warfare with the Communists. On one side was the Communist ideology, the National Liberation Front and behind it, the Communist party, calling itself the People's Revolutionary Party.

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

When President Diem was ousted, his counter-ideology and counter-machines were washed away. Since then, no single person has been in total command of the anti-Communist forces long enough to build a similar machine or ideology.

Since November, 1963, the country has been in a 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. They say instead that the Saigon government must reform itself and "out-revolutionize the Communists—but do it 10 times better and 50 times faster than the Communists themselves."

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

ECONOMIC DISASTER

But it was doomed. One American, fluent in Vietnamese, visited a pilot project in Cuchi, 20 miles from Saigon, and was told by peasants that the hamlet program was an economic disaster.

The peasants said the government forced them to construct hamlets instead of farm their cash crop of tobacco. As a result, they could produce only 10 per cent of what normally was raised.

The dilemma of American policymakers is the schizophrenic 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 land ownership. This elite minority attempts to govern the masses although it knows little about them and is concerned less.

The elite's lack of concern and compassion was illustrated in an incident related by the wife of a Western embassy official. The wives of embassy officials had voluntarily presented furniture, 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, cadre wanting to join the Communist party are sent to live with the rural masses and practice "three-togetherness"; eating, living and working with the peasants. Cadre 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 Viet Nam, nationalism went the Communist way. We saw a lot of Vietnamese in the South who 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 support us. But these people in an Asian country in the throes of political-social upheaval—they are not in the mainstream."

The diplomat continued:

"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."

MANDARIN SYSTEM

The lack of justice and equal opportunity is perhaps best reflected in the medical profession in Viet Nam, which one American-educated Vietnamese doctor called "The Medical Mafia." Two elite groups of doctors—the faculty of medicine at University of Saigon and a private organization called the Medical Syndicate—decide which doctors will be licensed for private practice. Virtually all the members of these 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 said. "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 1,000 years that leaders of the next generation are always chosen by those in power. This gives rise to the mandarin system and an undue amount of nepotism."

After 10 years of administering the largest U. S. medical aid program in the world—American officials here still have little influence on Vietnamese medical affairs. One American-trained Vietnamese doctor said that a medical degree from an American medical school still is not readily recognized in Viet Nam, on the other hand, a "parachute degree"—a degree virtually bought with money from a second-rate medical school in France—is easily acceptable by the "The Mafia."

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 there are two American-operated hospitals in France). Requests by the American-operated Seventh Day Adventist Missionary Hospital to expand their 30-bed clinic have repeatedly been refused.

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.

"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."

TOMORROW: The key issue of land reform.