

Viet Nam a Year After Diem— His Dire Prophecy Coming True

By Beverly Deepe
A Special Correspondent

SAIGON.

A year ago today, a military coup d'etat brought down the regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem.

The theme song for the Vietnamese generals toppling him in the 18-hour coup was "The Longest Day." Afterward, Saigonese presented garlands to the paratroopers and tank drivers, and there was dancing in the streets.

But the dancing did not last long, for one of President Diem's predictions began to come true.

Only a month earlier, during the flaming Buddhist crisis that sparked his overthrow, Mr. Diem had predicted: "Apres moi, le deluge."

Now, a year later, the deluge. The military and political war against the Communists is being lost under Mr. Diem, too, but as one Western diplomat explained last week, "We are now losing it more efficiently than ever before."

THE TRAGEDY

The tragedy is that the war can still be won, but probably will not be.

Several months ago, a leading Saigon fortune-teller made another prediction: that in the ninth month of the lunar calendar the trends of the future would become clear and Viet Nam's "little war would become bigger."

The ninth lunar month ends Tuesday—Election Day in the United States.

Saigonese and Western observers here are openly hoping that U. S. policy becomes clearer after the election. They feel that in the past months that policy has been to "back every status quo in sight" and to "hold the lid on Viet Nam until after the election."

Observers view these days as the turning point in the war, for to continue to drift is only to lose," according to one Western diplomat. "This is the point of no return." The pessimists say it is already too late to reverse the trends.

THE CLUES

The first clues to America's post-election policy have already appeared. Viet Nam's "little war" now appears bigger not only because of the flareup of Cambodian incidents but also because of the continuous flow of high-ranking Asian military delegations to Saigon, which is interpreted as evidence of a possible commitment of Asian combat troops. The Chinese Nationalist government's recent appointment of a general to serve as Ambassador to Saigon is also considered significant.

In the last week of suspense during the formation of the new Vietnamese government—which Saigon newspapers called "a la Hitchcock"—other clues about the future U. S. policy also appeared:

First, there will be no negotiations. A last-ditch attempt to prosecute the war will be made.

Second, the U. S. will again attempt to back a strongman ruler—who will be the former Premier, Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khanh, now the Commander in Chief. The civilian government will be restricted in authority, if it survives at all.

THE PROBLEMS

Based on talks with American officials and experts on counter-insurgency and communism in Asia, this is the rundown on the basic problems and possible solutions facing the "Ong My"—Mr. American, as the children in the rice paddy villages call the "white man with the big nose."

1. The basic American mistake was to expect that Viet Nam would be another Korea—to expect invasion instead of guerrilla warfare and subversion.

"The Communists won South Viet Nam in South Korea," according to one Western observer. "There was a Korean-type conventional war atmosphere here until the American buildup in 1962."

After that, the U. S. committed 20,000 military advisers, but only in the last four months have the U. S. Embassy and Information Service increased their staffs to keep up with the problems of political subversion and psychological warfare.

However, by mid-1956, the Communists Viet Cong shifted from legal to subversive political struggle as their cells in the villages and cities went under-

When he was named Mayor of Saigon two months ago by Premier Nguyen Khanh, 61-year-old Tran Van Huong was a dental clerk earning \$20 a month and suffering from high blood pressure. Yesterday he was confirmed by South Viet Nam's High National Council to take over Maj. Gen. Khanh's job as Premier.

In his first speech, he promised to clean out corruption, to put an end to the "terrible degradation" of youth, to bust red tape and the black market, to keep politics out of religion. His major goal: "To defeat the Communists and bring welfare to the people."

Said a U. S. observer: "This man looks really tough and really honest. I get the impression we might see some big changes around here, all for the best."

That changes are needed, no one disputes. But the observer's euphoria is not shared by every one taking a long-range view of mistakes made, problems faced and solutions required in the anti-Communist war, as Beverly Deepe reports in this last of seven articles.

be a total commitment—of money, men and the blood of more than 200 Americans killed in combat. But in many instances Americans themselves never took the final systematic steps needed to insure successful implementation of a program.

For months American leaders have toyed with the idea of having American advisers to Vietnamese commanders in the provinces stay more than a one-year tour. But the painful decision—unpopular with the GI's and their mothers—was never made. So even expert, Vietnamese-speaking field advisers effectively advise for a maximum eight months and then are shipped home. This is a symbol of the half war.

At the beginning of the important strategic hamlet program to fortify villages, the highest-ranking U. S. general here was told that instead of producing a socio-economic revolution in the villages the program was considered by the peasants to be an economic disaster. For villagers were forced to build strategic hamlets instead of working on the cash crop of tobacco and were forced to make fences from bamboo trees, their cushion crop.

But the policy had been set, and it was never changed. Consequently for two years America's multi-million-dollar strategic hamlet program rolled along to disaster until finally it failed after the fall of Mr. Diem.

The strategic hamlet concept is valid. The Communists proved that when they swiped the entire idea. They expertly set up their own combat hamlets complete with anti-helicopter poles and trenches in houses for defense, and their own hamlet militia program as the government concept called for. But they succeeded; the Americans did not.

THE FUTURE

Observers believe unity in the American mission has improved considerably under Ambassador Taylor, but more steps are needed. Possibly the fundamental mistake of Americans and Vietnamese is the same one made by the French during their anti-Communist struggle: Simply to make the same mistake over and over again. Clearly this must be changed—if it is not too late.

Victory in Viet Nam must be earned with back-breaking, painstaking efforts of working side by side with Vietnamese. Vietnamese troops must be held in a province until the area is pacified; government administrators must systematically interview each family to root out Communist agents.

This must be enforced with determination and justice and insisted upon by Americans. If this painful decision is ignored now, the result will be years of drifting toward a neutralist solution and an eventual Communist takeover. History may well say that Americans were defeated by Communist expansionists, but in fact it appears they will be defeated by their own mistakes.

At the philosophical level, Viet Nam is often viewed as a testing ground between American democracy and Asian communism. Some observers say that America has not made its revolutionary appeals relevant to Asia—especially its economic view of private enterprise is seen as increasing the wealth of the wealthy class without aiding the poor. Others, however, say that the U. S. has not demonstrated its democracy to Viet Nam.

"It is not a problem of philosophy but of performance," one Western diplomat said. "And our performance has been bad. The Communists preach our own philosophy of honest, efficient, just government to villagers—they implement it. We do not."

The key lesson from Viet Nam is that, as one Western diplomat explained, "the only good counter-insurgency is the one that is never fought because it is never allowed to start."

Observers here openly suggest that after the election the U. S. will set up "a small elite task force" of career civilian and military officers from all branches of service to deal with this "predictable type of war in the future."

In short, America's test is to win the counter-guerrilla and counter-revolutionary war in Viet Nam at this "crucial point of no return" and to win the same type of war in South America and Africa—before it needs to be fought.

ground—and they have since been organizing and effecting subversion with the help of thousands of party cadre who infiltrated from North Viet Nam.

While the Communist conducted this invisible but ever-present subversion, assassinating local leaders and weakening the government, the U. S. largely neglected to strengthen and reinforce the government administrative apparatus, and looked largely to fighting the armed guerrillas.

The newly formed civilian government, headed by Phan Khac Suu, has a weak apparatus with which to fight the Communist political organization—already eight years ahead of it in stability and direction.

A much-discussed solution to the problem of subversion is air strikes in Communist-infested southern Laos or air raids on North Viet Nam as a means to smother the significance of the internal developments. Observers here view this as a delaying action to postpone defeat and to attain a better bargaining position for negotiations. Instead, they suggest a "political raid" against Communist agents—whether they be Buddhist monks, student leaders or Catholic priests.

2. The American approach was to be liked rather than respected. "But you know Communists do not care if they are loved in Asia," said one Western observer. Even Vietnamese generals say the U. S. should interfere more in Vietnamese affairs—but "you do not have the courage to do that. You are afraid of being called a colonialist, but you will be called that anyway. You should force the government to be honest."

The result was that the U. S. acted neither with firmness nor with diplomacy; Vietnamese leaders were forced to read minds and, more important, only guess how programs should be implemented.

An example: Shortly after becoming Premier, Gen. Khanh appointed his brother-in-law as consulate general in Hong Kong, an important post not only for intelligence but also for financial dealings. The U. S. Embassy cabled Washington that the appointment would only remind the Vietnamese of the nepotism of the Diem regime. It did. But the embassy did not even suggest to Gen. Khanh that the appointment was unwise.

Observers believe that at the

highest level there should initially have been a formalized arrangement between the two governments—similar to an alliance—with specific areas of responsibility and authority for each nation. Vietnamese generals and Cabinet ministers should then have met with American teams regularly and formally to make joint decisions and oversee implementation.

Since the arrival of Ambassador Maxwell D. Taylor, such a committee has met in emergencies. But joint communiqués have not been issued, which perpetuates Communist propaganda that Americans are taking over command instead of advising the Vietnamese.

Observers believe that unless these top-level Saigon meetings are regularized, the strategists are only in a position to react to crises. Vietnamese intellectuals accuse America of not having a policy but instead it appears that this policy is not co-ordinated among all Vietnamese and American agencies.

3. As a corollary of this attitude, the U. S. gave everything (except nuclear weapons) to help the Vietnamese with materiel; its mistake was to demand nothing in return.

Especially under Mr. Diem the conditions of military and economic aid should have been demands for real reform in the Saigon provincial and village government. Instead, reforms were postponed until after the winning of the guerrilla war; but the lack of these reforms only refueled the war in the countryside.

Since the end of the French Indochina war in 1954, the U. S. has given \$3 billion in military aid and \$2 billion in economic aid—more than \$300 per capita, a year's salary for the lowest-paid Vietnamese.

Obviously much of this went into the defense budget. But no economic program can be successful without a well-functioning government machinery to pass through, which Americans did not demand. The consequent unplanned distribution systems give the impression that aid has gone only to the Mercedes Benz class rather than into the pockets of the rice paddy farmer.

In many instances America took the easy way out in Viet Nam: It made a half commitment and treated the war as a half war. Viet Nam appears to