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SAIGON--Rarely in moder^N history has American prestige, power and foreign policy rested so much on an election abroad as when Vietnamese voters trundle off to cast their ballots for President and Senate on September 3.

And rarely has American foreign policy--or the visible absence of a foreign policy--spun so many webs of uncertainty in an election overseas.

The Vietnamese elections for President and the 60-man Senate are regarded here as a major pivot point of the Vietnam war--preceeded in significance, drama, and possibly controversy, only by the American bombing of North Vietnam and the American commitment of ground forces to the South.

Within Vietnamese political circles, the heart of the Vietnamese election rests on the major American policy decision of whether to continue the war or to negotiate the peace with the Communists. That decision, still unknown here, adds to the uncertainty in the Vietnamese political ~~area~~ arena.

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A few sophisticates, ~~believed~~ ^{Escalation} believing more American military ~~operation~~ runs parallel with--and is not contradictory to--negotiations, argue that the American policy might be ~~to~~ ^{to} both prosecute the war with more vigor, assuming that at this very moment the Allies are in too weak a position to negotiate, while beginning the beginning of behind-the-scenes discussions with the Communists. If the American "war-peace" decision remains a mystery here, the Vietnamese elections will be unraveled in their own way, which will box in the alternatives of American policymakers.

"The Americans lose 200 GI's a week and \$2 billion a month here--they must have a policy," one well-placed Vietnamese anti-Communist explained.

"President Johnson must have a policy in his mind--but so far we don't know what that policy is. If the Americans want to try for victory, they must back the Vietnamese military ticket. If they want to try for peace, they must back a civilian--and a very flexible civilian--probably old Phan Khac Suu. The man of the moment must be flexible. But so far, we don't know what President Johnson wants--the Americans here are tight-lipped."

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From the beginning, the Vietnamese elections have been viewed as a possible vehicle for a political breakthrough leading to negotiations with the Communists. For the elections at least open up the choice for a Vietnamese civilian government which might solve the stickiest problem of ~~neg~~ negotiations--the role of the Southern-based National ~~Lib~~ Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam (NFL). Clearly, America would admit a political defeat to recognize or talk directly with the NFL--but a flexible government in Saigon could open up discussions with them.

The Vietnamese military ticket is considered here as a "war party" ticket. Presidential candidate General Nguyen Van Thieu and his running mate, Prime Minister Nguyen Cao Ky, thus far have stated they would be willing to talk with any Communists almost anywhere--except the NFL, which at any rate would probably be unwilling to talk with them anyhow.

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The corollary that any of the ten civilian Presidential ~~candidates~~ candidates are ^{the} a peace party is, however, not necessarily ^{true, although} ~~true~~, though it may be. But, the civilian candidates are also an agonizing gamble. What if a civilian is elected on a pro-peace platform--and the NFL still refuses to negotiate?[?] Communist subversion into the weaker civilian government could lead to an Allied defeat. The second gamble: what if an anti-~~neg~~ negotiation civilian President is elected--will the efficiency with which the war is conducted on the Vietnamese side diminish, thus demanding more and more American troops to salvage the situation? The answer is probably yes, for the Vietnamese Army, for all its numerous faults, is the only nation-wide apparatus which can fill the political vacuum created by the lack of nationalist political parties and a nationalist ideology, on one side, and continuing Communist subversion on the other.

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While the honest Vietnamese view is that the official U. S. "war-peace" ~~an~~ position is unknown, and the honest anti-Communist view is that American should make this decision known, this is not necessarily a prevailing view. For, the more numerous bush-league politicians, each confiding to the others they have inside information from the CIA, simply ~~proceed~~ ^{PROCEED} to invent their own American policy. Throughout the city, in political ~~circles~~ circles, rumors multiply in geometric proportions, some saying President Johnson made a peace deal with Kosygin, some saying the Americans are secretly backing a civilian candidate, some saying that the American officialdom here is split, with Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker ~~is~~ clandestinely backing a civilian and American commanding general William C. Westmoreland supporting the Vietnamese generals.

Even a naive observer may suspect, if not presume, that it is, not the CIA, but the pro-French and pro-Communist elements which are having a field day. For the net impact of all the rumors is to discredit virtually all the Vietnamese Presidential candidates, chisel divisions among them and to make the American officialdom here appear as bumbling hillbillies in Ivy League suits.

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The statement of Ambassador Bunker here, that America supports "no single candidate, and we oppose none," while explaining the virtues of free elections was openly received here by Vietnamese politicians as "a green light" for the nationalists to fight it out among themselves. With America officially on the sidelines during this ~~"purely"~~ "purely Vietnamese affair," the Vietnamese non-Communists have accelerated their latent maneuvering and intrigue to such an extent one Western diplomat ~~exclaimed~~ exclaimed:

"These nationalists are killing each other and loving every minute of it. These people can't be real--they're all on a Graham Greene film that goes ~~on~~ and ~~on~~."

While American officials talk about the growth of constitutionalism, the fear on the Vietnamese side is that they may get the opposite--chaos and anarchy. While the Americans talk of the virtues of a freely elected government, most Vietnamese would prefer any actual ~~government~~ THAT ACTUALLY GOVERNS, and a minority think the election won't even be held. While American sources, in private, predict a pre-cooked election victory for Generals Thieu and Ky, Chinese businessmen, noted for their political acumen and notorious for their gambling, are refusing to take any bets on who will win the race at all.

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Thus, it appears here that the politically-oriented Vietnamese and Americans are looking at the upcoming election in totally different terms, seeing two distinct events in the offing, which is a rather common phenomena here, generally explained in ~~journali~~ journalese as "the Americans being out of touch with Oriental realities," or in diplomat-ese, as "looking at a Vietnam problem on different levels."

The uncertainties in Vietnamese political circles about the election is matched only by their tenacious skepticism of them. This skepticism is based on the Vietnamese premise that the election is more advantageous to American interests than to Vietnamese interests, ~~x~~ and secondly, that the United States uses the highly whimsical tactic of interfering in the election when it chooses but makes "neutrality" ~~states~~ statements when it doesn't.

Part of this premise is based on the fact establish^{ED} by Vietnamese politicians and Western diplomats here, although never officially ~~it~~ confirmed ~~xxxx~~ nor denied by the American officialdom, that the prime mover for the elections was President Lyndon Johnson, who insisted on them at the Honolulu Conference in February, 1966, when he met with Generals Thieu and Ky. Ky and Thieu both opposed the idea of elections when their internal political and military situations were ^{then} still so perilous.

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But, less than 48 hours after the Vietnamese delegation returned here from Honolulu, the anti-government Buddhist leaders knew about the President's desire for elections. And, through a series of demonstrations, bloody riots and a civil-military insurrection, they pressured the Ky government to hold the elections--originally scheduled for the fall of 1966, but now being held a year behind schedule.

Why did President Johnson insist on Vietnamese elections? The first, over-riding reason, it appeared, was to establish a legitimate government in Saigon. For, America is currently faced with the astronomical dilemma that it has 470,000 American ~~troop~~ troops in Vietnam at the invitation of a ~~government~~ government that no longer exists--the government of Prime Minister Phan Huy Quat in early 1965--and even when it existed, it was never considered legal, and for that matter, rarely considered a government. Thus, a legitimate government is needed to legalize the American presence here, and whether the American policy is to bring in more troops or to ^{begin} ~~being~~ talking with the Communists, or straddling both courses simultaneously, America needs a legal Vietnamese government to validate the ~~American~~ moves.

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A significant fringe benefit from a popularly-elected, constitutional government here would be a much more palatable ~~regime~~ regime to justify to American's friends and enemies at home and abroad the increasing measure of American commitment of ground ~~troops~~ troops. On the pragmatic side internally, American officials have maintained fair elections would enhance the willingness of the Vietnamese ~~popul~~ population to support a government they themselves elected, and to promote this end, a series of elections for hamlet and village chiefs, plus the constitution-drafting assembly have been held in the past year.

If these American objectives are laudable and necessary, ^{they} ~~they~~ are somewhat ~~hypotheth~~ hypothetical for Vietnamese who hold bitter political memories of the so-called free elections which put President Ngo Dinh Diem in ~~h~~ office for nine years--and which, rather than gaining him popular support, only repelled it. ~~Like~~ Likewise, the American premise that the election may usher in a legitimate ~~regim~~ government remains to be seen, for vicious controversies may arise that the election ~~was~~ was rigged, especially since several well-known candidates have been barred from running. The American ^{DREAM} dream that a stable, popular government may blossom is also debatable at this time, for political observers here are shocked at the street demonstrations in ~~the~~ South Korea, contesting the fairness of the election ~~in~~ there.

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The Vietnamese constitution is modeled after the South Korean constitution, and hence it is easy here to jump to conclusions, only partially justified at this moment, that charges of a rigged election and street violence may be one of the ~~likely~~ likely by-products of such a constitution here.

The Vietnamese skepticism was recently reinforced here with the view snowballing in political circles that the American officialdom "dumped" Prime Minister Ky and ~~him~~ helped out-maneuver him from the Presidential race. He accepted to run as Vice-Presidential candidate to Chief of State General Thieu. The move was interpreted as especially significant here for Ky had remained in power for two years with the express backing of--not the American Ambassador or Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, has had his predecessors-- but the backing of President Johnson, who became personally identified with the pilot-premier at three rapid-fire, high-level conferences in Honolulu, Manila and Guam.

But, by the middle of this year, Washington began to re-think its position on Ky, and commissioned an American political scientist from a New York ~~university~~ university to evaluate whether the United States should continue its support of Ky. The professor was of some importance, for he had advised the Koreans in the drafting of their constitution and had subsequently assisted the Vietnamese in drafting their Korean-styled constitution. The professor's surprising recommendations were tht that it would be a disaster for Ky to run for President and a double ~~disaster~~ disaster ^{FINER COPY} for the U.S. to do so.

By early June, the Americans were faced with the added problem that General Thieu had announced his candidacy, which, in ~~the~~^{THEIR} view, meant the Vietnamese armed forces would be racked with dissension when it should be fighting the Communists. The ~~original~~ American officials failed to ~~add~~^{add}, however, that having two military candidates competing with each other would decrease the possibility of a rigged election, for neither general had exclusive control of the government ~~and~~^{and} structures needed for rigging.

Then, in ~~the~~^{early} June, the Vietnamese Ambassador to Washington, Mr. ~~Bui~~^{Bui} Diem, appeared in Saigon and sprinkled around the town his claims of having seen President Johnson in Washington. He proceeded to the Presidential Palace to attempt to persuade General Thieu to withdraw from the race. He left Saigon several days later predicting it was "~~surely~~" "seventy per cent sure" that Thieu would withdraw. But a quick check of Thieu's supporters showed the ~~little~~ little general had even less intention of withdrawing than ever.

By mid-June--with time running out--American officials were faced with two military candidates ~~for~~ for President and they wanted only one. There were at least three standard alternatives for the United States; each about equally ~~bad~~ bad: to persuade Thieu at any cost--generally expressed in dollars--to withdraw, or to "shovel out" Ky, as one source explained, which would have been interpreted as a direct about-

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the Americans would neither oppose nor support any candidate, ^{during the election,} which ^{casting} withdrew American support from Ky, while at the same time ~~casting~~ the American position ^{AS} into one of praiseworthy non-interference.

This latter alternative was the choice when ~~Ambassador B~~ Ambassador Bunker finally called Generals ~~Thieu~~ Thieu and Ky to his house for lunch--diplomats believe Bunker waited too long~~ly~~ for the showdown--and criticized Ky for ~~going~~ beginning his campaign early, which would undercut the appearance of a ~~fa~~ free election, and then stated that the Vietnamese military could have only one candidate-- a pledge that Ky and Thieu had ~~both~~ both made to President ~~Jay~~ Johnson ~~at~~ at the Guam Conference, the President's reasoning reportedly being that a free election did not include a free-for-all among the generals.

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Then, on June 28, three days before the final filing for the Presidential ~~run~~ race, the 48 ~~Vietn~~ Vietnamese generals who run the armed forces--and pretend to run the country--were called in to arbitrate the confrontation between Ky and Thieu. A free-for-all was one ~~of the best~~ results. ^{ⓧ Another} ~~the other~~ was Ky's withdrawing from the Presidency and accepting to run as Vice President with Thieu. When the results was announced, those Americans who thought America was still supporting Ky were shocked; one of them sadly predicting, "this is the beginning of the worst." The Ky supporters were also stunned--not only because their leader had been defeated, but also because his Presidential campaign funds, totalling sixty million piastres--or half-million dollars--were to be handed out six hours after the crucial decision.

But, the most surprised to all was ~~to be~~ General ~~N~~ Nguyen Cao Ky, who erroneously thought he still had ~~the~~ support from Washington.