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Inside Saigon— U.S. Is Losing A Political War

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SAIGON.

Communist Viet Cong guerrillas killed two U. S. Marines and wounded eight others in two weekend clashes near the strategic Da Nang air base. These were the first U. S. Marine deaths in four days of skirmishing between the guerrillas and the Marines, who are protecting the base.

The American fatalities came as the political situation in Saigon was drifting toward the lowest point in a decade.

For the 12th straight day, U. S. Air Force jet bombers pounded military points in North Viet Nam yesterday, but a Saigon business man observed that "as the military war against the Communists grows bigger, the Communists' political war grows hotter."

And a high-ranking American officer said: "The war cannot be won in Saigon—but it can and is being lost in Saigon. The question is whether the political situation can or will be reversed."

The two Marine deaths came early today when guerrillas overwhelmed two Marine outposts. Four Marines were wounded. Yesterday four other Marines were slightly wounded 13 miles southwest of Da Nang—two hit by Red snipers' bullets and two caught in a Red-built mantrap.

In the air operations, 35 F-105s supported by 25 jet fighters destroyed a Route 1 bridge and damaged a ferry crossing, both near Vinh, 135 miles south of Hanoi. Six Canberra jets knocked out a road convoy in strafing attacks on Routes 7, 8 and 12. No planes were reported lost.

The Instability

Anti-Communist political observers in Saigon compared the present political situation to the dismal days of 1955, when the gambling pirates called Binh Xuyen shelled the Presidential Palace of Ngo Dinh Diem.

"We are now in one of the worst states of instability I've yet seen," the Saigon business man said.

This is accompanied by a growing anti-Americanism. "The American Marines, the American jets, the American advisers—everything but your economic aid is likely to be chucked out of here in a bloody, ungracious manner," one Western diplomat predicted.

These political observers believe that the internal political situation should be an inducement for the Communist-led National Liberation Front—and Hanoi—to negotiate for peace. They argue that the Communists control most of the rice-rich Mekong delta, the pro-neutralists now have a toe-hold in the present government, while the most anti-Communist elements—the Catholics and the armed forces—are either leaderless or disunited. More significant, this pro-neutralist trend is expected to grow in the coming weeks as its supporters prepare the means to obtain more power within the government and more control of the future legal mechanisms of the government.

For example, Prime Minister Phan Huy Quat recently signed a decree outlining procedures for the election of city and provincial councils on May 30—in which, according to the 40-page statute, Viet Cong secret agents and their covert sympathizers would not be denied the right to vote. The acting Chief of State, Phan Khac Suu, last week appealed for the election of a National Congress, which political observers predict would easily be penetrated by pro-Communist and pro-neutralist elements.

The Military

Political observers here have long considered the Vietnamese armed forces more unified, more disciplined and more anti-Communist than the civilian elements of the population—but the trend in the last six weeks has been for the armed forces to play a decreasing role in political affairs.

This growing pro-neutralist trend within official government circles—and the future legal institutions—has been accompanied by a sub-surface state of

bubbling discontentment with the American-backed government of Prime Minister Quat and with the Americans.

The Right-wing Catholics accuse the dapper Prime Minister of being too soft on the Buddhists, whom they consider Communist subversives; the pro-neutralist Buddhist politico-priests, who jubilantly supported Mr. Quat when he took office nine weeks ago, "are now stopping their support of him," as one pro-Buddhist layman explained, and they have initiated an avalanche of rumors that Mr. Quat is "the puppet of the Americans."

Likewise, the Vietnamese—of all political colors—believe the American military leaders are moving closer and closer to the French colonial position militarily—thus incurring all the disadvantages psychologically of being tabbed as colonialists, but with none of the colonialists' advantages of political control.

Neither is the American bombing of North Viet Nam shoring up the anti-Communist government position; the Southern-born anti-Communists are more depressed at the Saigon political situation than they are encouraged at the bombing of North Viet Nam; some of the Northern-born anti-Communists openly resent their homeland being bombed.

In short, the invisible, unarmed subversive war is now considered far more significant than the violent, bloody guerrilla war in the countryside, which has been going spectacularly, but not consistently, well for the government side.

THE ATROCITIES

Another report by Beverly Deepe—on atrocities by Communist and government forces in Viet Nam—is on Page 18.