

In Viet Nam—Fate IS in the Stars

IN TROUBLED South Viet Nam, Premier Nguyen Khanh warned yesterday that the army will break up a threatened demonstration today by trade unions who claim the government has failed to keep its promises to labor. Politically powerful Gen. Tran Thien Khiem for the second time in two days postponed his departure to diplomatic exile in Europe. And Communist guerrillas who had set up road blocks only 20 miles outside Saigon faded away after two skirmishes—while maintaining road blocks on Highway 30 farther north. To many Vietnamese, the turmoil was easily explained: it was foretold in the stars.

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SAIGON.

Only a few Vietnamese took the latest Gulf of Tonkin incident very seriously. After all, astrologers and fortune tellers in this Year of the Dragon said September would be an uneventful month.

While in the West astrologers are looked upon as hucksters, in the Orient their predictions have a direct bearing on the minutest details of everyday life, the policy decisions made in palaces and cabinet meetings and the best time to change governments.

At the beginning of each lunar year, ushered in with joyous Chinese New Year celebrations in January or February, fortune tellers and astrologers begin to make predictions for the year in their small homes decorated with elaborate shrines to their favorite genii. As the smell of incense and joss-sticks from the altars floats through their books of Chinese date on the movements of the stars. One of the classics, "The Book of Movement" was written by Confucius in 500 B. C. It explains the movements of the stars, the destiny of the uni-

verse, the fate of the world and man's cycle of life.

The material in these books is considered scientific data; the interpretation of this data is an art cultivated by deep-thinking scholars.

Their predictions for the remainder of 1964:

The ninth month of the lunar calendar (October), will show a clearer pattern of events in Viet Nam, as opposition forces polarize.

The eleventh month, (December 4 to January 2) will bring a "bigger little war."

In 1965, the Year of the Snake, the anti-Communist war becomes "a big limited war."

So far, the predictions of the fortune tellers about Viet Nam affairs have not been too far from wrong.

At the beginning of the year, they openly predicted that Prime Minister Maj. Gen. Nguyen Khanh would have trouble in the seventh month—August. During that month, he had the opposition of Buddhist leaders and pro-Buddhist student demonstrations—which literally toppled him from office—while his country witnessed Catholic-Buddhist religious warfare and several days of general anarchy.

His future: He will have more trouble in the eleventh-

month than he did in August, the astrologers say.

For the Vietnamese people, an individual's fate and destiny are directly related to the movements of the great unknowns—the stars and the moon. Each family has its own favorite astrologer or fortune teller much as Americans have a family doctor. Astrologers are told the exact hour, day, month and year of one's birth. From this they can predict the future. Viet-

namese families consult the fortune tellers on any major change to be made. Examples: If the family is to buy sunny on Oct. 26. That teller says in which direction the house should face, what color it should be painted. When a baby is born into the family, his horoscope is immediately taken to the astrologers, who predict his fate, and perhaps his name. One Vietnamese general gave his newborn daughter to a friend

for five years because his fortune teller warned she would die if she remained with him. Several years ago a high-ranking government official always wore a black shirt—so he would live longer.

When the first preludes to a coup d'etat are known in Saigon, the fortune tellers regularly grab their books, make hasty calculations and predict whether the coup will succeed or fail. One fortune teller, when he heard the tanks and troops moving into Saigon two weeks ago, immediately predicted it would fail. Another claims to have predicted five years in advance the downfall of Ngo Dinh Diem, who was overthrown Nov. 1, last year.

During the last weeks of August, rainstorms consistently broke out during the hectic student demonstrations and Catholic-Buddhist street fighting in Saigon. One Vietnamese taxi driver expressed a typical reaction, "The gods cause these rains because they are against all these demonstrations. They want them to stop."

Recently, as the northern provinces suffered continued political agitation and student demonstrations, a vicious typhoon swept through the area, which was considered a bad omen for the Vietnamese residents.

The predictions of fortune tellers also affect the affairs of state. Not so long ago a vernacular paper in Saigon printed a story describing the wife of a minister consulting

fortune tellers about the decrees her husband should sign. The Vietnamese reader accepted this as normal—and their only question was "whose wife is it?"

According to reliable sources, the date of Viet Nam's national day was set by a fortune teller. In 1955, when the Republic of Viet Nam was established, President Diem sent a friend to consult a renowned fortune teller and scholar of Chinese literature. The fortune teller said that though Viet Nam was in the wet monsoon period, the weather would be sunny on October 26. That lucky date was chosen for the national day.

Vietnamese commanders in the field regularly consult the fortune tellers to determine the best hour and day of attack, when and where to assign their subordinates, when their headquarters should be changed. This is also true of the Communist guerrillas, even though they officially disavow these "superstitions."

With such a powerful influence on the fate of the nation, both the Vietnamese government and the Communist guerrillas attempt to utilize the fortune tellers as their propaganda agents. Even American Embassy officials have expressed interest in the ways of the astrologers.

For those fortune tellers who are consistently accurate, leading government officials present lavish gifts, such as Rolex watches.