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SAIGON--Vietnam has witnessed the introduction of not simply helicopter warfare, but also helicopter diplomacy.

The "cookie-pushers in striped pants," as the envoys were once derisively called, have escalated from the more modern open-shirt jeep diplomacy during the past decade to the ~~the~~ khaki-clad helicopter diplomacy currently employed in Vietnam.

This new era in diplomacy, still undergoing drastic changes, includes whirlwind tours in the giant whirlybirds by such visiting bigwigs as American ~~sen~~ Senators or the Vice President, Presidential hopefuls, the Thai prime minister inspecting his country's Queen Cobra Regiment, a California Congressman being photographed with California G. I.'s and ~~a~~ delegations of South Korean or Filipino officials spiralling down to ~~sa~~ chat with their nations' troop commitments.

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On the American side, this type of diplomacy has become so prevalent that a ~~helic~~ heliport has been constructed atop the ~~new~~ new U. S. Embassy situated in the heart of Saigon. And, a private civilian airline, called Air America, has been contracted ^{by} ~~the~~ the American government to provide helicopter transport for the ~~bevis~~ ^{bevis} of U. S. officials from Saigon and Washington pirouetting around the Vietnamese countryside. All U. S. military services--Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines--maintain their own helicopter units.

In the broadest sense, helicopter diplomacy is also practiced by the South Vietnamese officials within their own country, first when they visit Allied troop units and second when they represent the central government with an inspection of a remote village or ~~oft~~ outpost which rarely ~~see~~ sees close-up a helicopter or a Vietnamese President. The high Vietnamese officials probably originated the idea of helicopter diplomacy in the first place some four or five years ago, and now President Nguyen Van Thieu by helicopter commutes from his home on the outskirts of Saigon to the Presidential Palace in the heart of the city. Originally, all aircraft and helicopters were ordered to skirt Saigon because they made too much noise over the city (and often signalled a coup attempt); now Saigonese regularly see the Presidential helicopter touch down on the Palace lawn amongst carefully tended shrubbery and flowers.

This trend of "Have Helicopter--Will Travel" was recently dramatized by South Vietnamese President Thieu when he visited Allied troops units in the provinces surrounding Saigon. The explicit purpose of the ~~trip~~ diplomatic venture was to express South Vietnamese appreciation to the Allied units and to wish the troops a happy holidays--Christmas ~~and~~ and New Years for American and Australian troopers and lunar new year in late January for the South Korean troops. An integral part of helicopter diplomacy is widespread press coverage designed to radiate an ~~ante~~ energetic, team-mate image within Vietnam and abroad.

Thus, a full platoon of correspondents--foreign journalists, television crews, ~~invl~~ including those for the national Vietnamese network, the semi-government press agency and Presidential press officers, departed Saigon's Tan Son Nhut airport at 8 a.m. They were transported in three Vietnamese helicopters; the pilots wore the famed black flying suits and lavender neckerchiefs, which have epitomized their "wind of the gods" character since their first bombing raids over North Vietnam in early 1965. As the helicopters fluttered above and then away from the world's busiest airport, cars below appeared toy-size and the pillboxes, stores and houses of "suburban" Saigon assumed doll-size measurements. Then, northwest of the capital, over the nipa palms and rice paddies into a different century.

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Fifty feet in front of several startled Vietnamese peasant women, a wavering column of ~~canal~~ green smoke from a ~~q~~ tin can arose ~~from~~ amidst one bone-dry paddy--and the heli trio of ~~heliscop~~ helicopters, like giant metal ~~dean~~ dragonflies, spiralled downward. The press party was met by a mini-convoy of ~~Kor~~ South Korean jeeps, each spotlessly washed clean of the over-present red dust--and luxuriated with white rubber mats on the floor and plastic ~~charif~~ chair frames cushioning the seats. From the rice paddies of Vietnam, the ~~delegatio~~ delegation was driven several hundred ~~miles~~ ^{YARDS} into an aberration in the wilderness--an Oriental country within an Oriental country.

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Sandbagged bungalow-styled war-rooms, operations buildings and watch-towers, like eerie, king-sized igloos, dotted the landscape of the headquarters for the South Korean "Dove" Engineering Battalion. It was the first South Korean unit to arrive in Vietnam in 1965, a Vietnamese press officer told new correspondents--and ~~spring~~ ^{spring} sprigs of grass sprouted from the sandbags atop the buildings. Signs in the headquarters area, indicating "War Room" were painted ~~precisely~~ with precision in English and Korean.

From the ~~multi~~ multi-storied watch-towers and elevated machinegun positions, well-starched Korean look-outs with binoculars peered over the Vietnamese landscape. The scene resembled ~~marathon~~ the demilitarized zone in another war in another decade--the dug-in positions along the 38th parallel, as though a part of South Korea had been transplanted to Vietnam.

"Where are we?" one American correspondent queried in astonishment.

"Binh Thuan village, in Gia Dinh province."

"How far from Saigon?"

"Ten minutes by a helicopter," he was told.

"Ah, all distances are now measured in minutes," the correspondent pontificated.

The South Koreans had ~~made~~ made substantial efforts to impress the South Vietnamese President they were committed to fight for; their welcoming party was headed by Korean Ambassador Shin Sang Shul, the dean of Saigon's diplomatic corps who sported a blue suit and giant-sized cigar, and the commander of all ~~ROK~~ Korean forces in Vietnam, General Chae Myung Shin, who can readily quote and refute ~~Mao Tse Tung~~ Tung Tung's guerrilla warfare strategy.

At 8:15, within ~~mini~~ minutes, President Thieu arrived in an helicopter along with a many-splendored array of Vietnamese brass and General Creighton W. Abrams, deputy U. S. commander in Vietnam. As the American-piloted passenger helicopters touched down, a duo of American poised "Cobra" gunships spun fi feverishly through the airspace to suppress any incoming gunfire, ~~which was non-existent.~~

President Thieu, wearing a civilian-styled khaki suit was ushered into the war room (the press delegation was barred) and a South Korean officer could be heard through the open window to present a briefing in the Vietnae Vietnamese language. The Vietnamese tones were enunciated in guttural, staccato fashion; the accent was different "like a Frenchman speaking English," one Vietnamese commented. President Thieu then gave a short speech, presented a lacquer-ware ^{PLAQUES} plaques to the Koreans and in turn received a Korean plaque from them. At 8:40, the Presidential and the press delegations departed in spe separate helicopter convoys.

Then, eastwards to Bearcat, the headquarters of the U. S. 9th Infantry Division, which President Thieu later described as "a city in the jungle," and which a Western journalist described as "a meaningless anomaly ~~xxx~~ carved out of the jungle with no relation to anything around it." The press delegation was greeted by an air conditioned Army bush bus, which ~~x~~ was in turn escorted by a jeep with Snoopy's words painted near the windshield reading, "Curse you, Red Baron." The Presidential delegation was greeted by the 9th Division ~~x~~ band playing "the Colonel Boogie March," a very fancy honor guard of half dozen platoons and a roster of five other American generals representing other U. S. units and commands in the area. The half page roster of dignitaries was mimeographed on white paper marked "confidential" with the notation: "Downgraded at 3 yr intervals; ~~x~~ declassified after 12 yrs; DOD dir 5200.16".

In ten ~~unit~~ minutes, President Thieu was given a brush-stroke briefing by the Americans and then he gave a speech ~~praising~~ praising the U. S. troops for their "spectacular results," for opening the roads around Saigon's defense periphery. He said the Communist main forces had ~~be~~ been pushed into sanctuaries along the DMZ, the Laos and Cambodian borders, "which is a good sign for us because we have the opportunity to destroy them away from the populated areas." Again, the President gave out neatly wrapped gifts of ~~laqu lacqua lacquerward lacquere~~ lacquerware, and the 9th Division made the President an honorary member of the "Octofoil; ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ the unit's emblem of "eight brothers surrounding the 9th ninth brother in the middle," in the words of their press officer.

The generals then came onto the fringe of the parade grounds where iced Lipton's tea was served. President Thieu cocked his sea-br sea-blue baseball cap with edged with heavy gold braid and ~~ja~~ chatted with the American officers.

Suddenly and unexpectedly, U. S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker, in cotton pinstrip suit, arrived with an American aide and joined the tea-sipping party. President Thieu said to the Ambassador: "From the air, I believed this (Bearcat) was a new city." General Abrahms, ~~Abrahms~~ continuing the chitchat, then described a 96-ton machine which cut down the jungle so "it looks like a quilt when you fly over it."

Then the Ambassador whispered to President Thieu: "Could I have a word with you." Thieu agreed and they stepped into the general's office, along with the Ambassador's aide and General Abrahms. Ten minutes later, the foursome came out, presumably having discussed an extension of the New Year's truce which the Vatican had requested. The Ambassador then drove in a jeep to his helicopter and ~~he~~ as he walked 'chopper-wards, his brown hat ~~blow~~ was blown off his head and it skittled across the driveway. A half dozen Army officers ran after it and retrieved it.

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Then the Nui Dat, along the South China Sea, where the 8000-man Australian-New Zealand Task Force was headquartered amongst rubber trees. The same procedures were followed--the official briefing, a short speech of appreciation by President Thieu, Vietnamese gifts to the Australians and coffee and busou biscuits under an exquisite portrait of Queen Elizabeth in the officer's club.

At noon, the helicoptering delegations landed in the midst of another rice paddy, this time signalled in by a column of red smoke. A peasant woman, with obvious disgust, began to move her mats-ful of unhusked rice away from the whirring 'choppers. The press delegation began to walk down the dusky road, lined with freshly planted coconut palms, to where President Thieu would visit the Vietnamese Revolutionary Development teams and their ~~at~~ security battalions.

Glancing at the austere thatch huts baking in the dazzling, high-noon sun, a newly-arrived correspondent emoted: "This looks like it's right out of the Middle Ages." But, the trunks of the trees had been whitewashed for the Presidential visit, the school now sported pink swings and teeter-totters, the local police wore their freshly polished shoulder pistols, the soldiers, forming the honor guard, wore shoulder braids of gold.

The Presidential briefing in this Ben Thanh village was held in a hot tent. The village, consisting of six hamlets, was defended by one regular Vietnamese Army battalion and two local militia platoons. Four Americans advised them. The senior adviser, Capt. Ronnie Williams, explained:

"When I first arrived (9 $\frac{1}{2}$ months ago) this was a stronghold of the 514th Viet Cong battalion. There were possible enough people to crowd the marketplace, but no more. There was no children; no rice; only weeds; no school or dispensary. The houses were torn down; the roads were impassible and the whole area was heavily booby-trapped and mined. The overall appearance was sort of negative.

"Now since the Vietnamese battalion and Revolutionary Development teams have come in, the living conditions have picked up. People are making money from their ricefields; I've seen people growing vegetables where not nothing but weeds grew before. I've seen them growing cattle and some have started making bricks again. More people have moved back into the area and re-built their homes."

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President Thieu inspected the development teams, clad in the black p~~j~~amas pajamas of peasants, the defense bunkers, the austere lean-tos serving as the soldiers' billets, the 2- two-room dispensary and the three-room school, where the children shouted "stand up" in unison as the President entered. Thieu stopped to ask one wide-eyed sch⁹ schoolboy "where do you live; were you in school before?", but the tot, too shy to answer, simply fidgetted with the hole in the back of his faded cotton shirt. For the occasion, the Vietnamese schoolteachers, in simply flowing ao dais, had planted ~~some~~ small bouquets of flowers on their desk; an expended artillery shell had been suspended from a tree to serve as a ding-dong bell calling the children to ~~call~~ class.

In the newly-repaired marketplace, Thieu stopped to look at the community's 21-inch television set, and ordered it turned on to be sure it worked. A snow blizzard appeared on the set; programming had not yet begun for the day.

"The TV is turned on every night and 400 to 500 people come to the market to watch it," one Vietnamese civilian government civilian employe explained. "Even the Viet Cong come and watch it, tho they never say they're V. C."

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Then, the President stopped at an "upper-class" farm house with a concrete floor, tiled roof and wooden siding and asked the old man residing there: "Do you know who I am?"

The old man with a straggly beard answered, "No."

The village chief then introduced the President and the old man said he had voted for Thieu as President in the September elections.

"I remember your ticket," the old man said. He continued:

"This is ~~z~~ once in a life-time for me. Never in my life have I seen a President. Now, 'til the day I die, I think I will be conti contented."

Then, a gay, open-air lunch under palmtrees and a white parachute from an expended illumination flare. The President sat at the head of the officers officer's table in a wooden armchair of rose embossed satin; the press also was seated; the company of regular soldiers, however, stood up at their assigned tables for the meal.

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The traditional Vietnamese ~~mean~~ meal of stewed and braised beef was interspr interspersed with very non-Vietnamese rock 'n' roll music played on two electric guitars, electrically amplified, and a trumpet. Several female singers, dressed in fatigues and high-heeled shoes sang, representing the Vietnamese Army's 403rd Psychological Warfare Company. A quartette of Revolutionary Development cadre sang the rousing R. D. song, while a five-year old lass, dressed in mini-airborne fatigues, watched wide-eyed and sipped an iced pop.

Then, ~~ix~~ a Vietnamese company commander, with a short Beattle haircut, red neckerchief and shoulder holster, sang a melancholy song. He commanded the 1st Co., 1st Bn., 11th Reg., 7th ARVN Division. A Vietnamese major, who ten years ago had studied at the Ft. Benning (Ga.) Infantry School, explained the song, which he loosely translated to mean "Nostalgia." "The company commander is from North Vietnam," he said, "and the song is about his exodus from Hanoi and his memories of Hanoi and sometime he expects to go back to the North. Something like MacArthur's speech in the Philippines: 'I'll 'I'll be back'."

He turned to his American advisor, a young captain from Pennsylvania, and explained: "The song is something similar to Frost's poem 'The Road N_ot Taken'." The captain, an English literature major in college, nodded and explained, "From "Frost comes down ~~then~~ a road in the poem and there's a fork in the road and he can go either way. He takes the one least traveled by. He could go into business and earn money or he could write poetry, and as he looks back he thinks he took the right road."

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The Vietnamese major said parenthetically to a visitor:
"The captain teaches me American dictation 15 minutes a day. He reads me at least one poem each day and I read it back to him and then we discuss it."

The Vietnamese singing Vietnamese company commander ended "Nostalgia" with a salute. Then, the correspondents pulled their chairs into a semi-circle under the palms to the interview President Thieu. For twenty minutes, the President answered the probing questions, ~~mostly~~ mostly in the negative. No, the President said, he would not personally ask Pope Paul to mediate the Vietnam problem. ~~Non~~ No No, the President emphasized, his government would not recognize the National Liberation Front, but he would talk to individual Communists. No, the President said, his foreign minister was not going to talk with North Vietnamese representatives in Paris or Africa.

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