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South Vietnam's perky, petite First Lady, Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, in a flowing, flowered ao dai dress, announced in / high-pitched petulant staccatos that the American press is is "infiltrated with Communism." Gripping the tape recorder speaker of Mutual Broadcasting's Stan Lawrence, she said that, in fact, the correspondents in Vietnam were worse than Communists. In the text of the speech released December 2, she explained, "They (Western correspondents) are intoxicated by Communists. They believe whatever they say and speak for them--for the Communists, but in a Western tone. That is why it is worse, according to me."

While the bombastic sister-in-law of bachelor President Ngo Dinh Diem has previously blasted the foreign--particularly American--press and "that crazy freedom in your country", it was more interesting that no free-world embassy official in Vietnam refuted her / statement. Saigon's quiet Viet Virginian, United States Ambassador Frederick E. Nolting was unwilling to comment on it publicly. Only Senate majority leader, Mike Mansfield, visiting Vietnam on a Presidential fact-finding mission, expressed through an "official spokesman" that he was "concerned about her remarks. (More)

Western newsmen were neither surprised, amused nor unduly disturbed at the explosive statements of the First Lady, often described as "a woman who controls nothing, but influences everything in Vietnam." What infuriated them was that for three weeks they had unofficially been barred from going into the critical southern third of the country, the rice-rich delta region known as III Corps, on the U. S. troop-carrying H-21 helicopters, piloted by Americans and ~~until~~ ultimately commanded by General Paul D. Harkins, military Assistance Commander. Though ~~fifth~~ fifty United States helicopters and 200 Americans were in combat on Thanksgiving Day in one of the largest ~~in~~ known helicopter missions in history, no firsthand coverage was allowed and government news releases on it were irritatingly scant.

In Vietnam, "where there's no such thing as a straightforward fact" as one veteran correspondent explained--the foreign press concluded "we have to use guerrilla tactics to get the news."

The "unofficial ban" was labelled a "misunderstanding." To clarify the "misunderstanding" required three weeks' of bargaining and bickering, of the "tears, sweat and blood" of American officialdom from the lowest to the highest level between General Harkins and Assistant Defense Minister Nguyen Dinh Thuan.

For three weeks, foreign newsmen stormed about the "press mess." ("Stop treating us like spies," one of them warned. Another~~m~~ muttered, "They think it's a ~~priv~~ privilege to wade waist-deep through rice paddies.") Some protested to high-ranking officials in Saigon. Some urged their home offices to protest to appropriate Washington officials in the Pentagon, State Department and White House. (Washing~~g~~ expressed no concern or change of

2 policy to Saigon military top-brass.) Others sputtered that with the United States investing a million and half dollars a day and the lives of American servicemen in Vietnam, the Americans were not bargaining forcefully enough--that United States policy followed too closely the Saigon by-words, "Don't rock the boat" or "It's a Vietnamese war."

Some vociferously accused General Harkins, on whom the ultimate American decision rested, of refusing to put his foot down. ("Harkins is more than a commander here," one correspondent mused. "He's also a full-time diplomat.")

And others implied a concerted conspiracy between Vietnamese thinking as expressed by Madame Nhu and American officials not only in Saigon, but also in Washington, which had just lifted few its own press restrictions during the Cuban crisis.

"Let's fact it," one correspondent said. "The Americans have a bucket of worms worms here; they want to hid the facts. The war isn't going as well as they say it is."

Finally, this Tuesday, the time-flittering, lacksadasical Vietnamese, once characterized as "people without the sense of urgency God gave a baby", agreed that foreign correspondents could ride United States helicopters with Vietnamese Defense Department authorization written for each correspondent prior to each mission. However, ~~the following day~~ on Wednesday, twenty United States H-21 whirleybirds flew into combat--but without any correspondents on them.

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Correspondents viewed the arrangement as generally unsatisfactory. One called it a "two-steps-forward-and-one-step-backwards" victory for the Vietnamese, who ~~now~~ held the right to veto a specific newsman from going on a specific mission at any time--or of allowing no one to go at a specific time. It was interpreted not only as a defeat for adequate press coverage, but also for American military policy which failed to articulate the right of U. S. four-star general Harkins to determine the passenger list of helicopters under his command.

"Just call us the Obedient Americans," one correspondent laughed.

Earlier than the helicopter haggle was an even more obnoxious "censorship-at-the-source" restriction. Vietnamese units and personnel were warned to "be cautious in their relationship with reporters." The directive issued by Brig. Gen. Nguyen Khanh, Vietnamese Army Chief of Staff, on October 13 and only recently enforced, ordered Vietnamese units to make statements to the press only with consent and approval of the Defense Department. And even with the Defense Department approval they "must continue to request reporters to submit their written questions first and then reply in writing." The written questions and answers must be approved by the ~~the~~ Defense Department and three other offices.

While ~~press~~ Vietnamese press officials insist these elaborate procedures are needed only for "press conference" type of news gathering, Vietnamese soldiers in the ~~x~~ field are reluctant to talk.

Besides the blockage on news gathering, the Vietnamese government had in the past ten weeks exercised ~~the full~~ ^{AWIDE} gamut of press censorship methods:
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restricted dissemination of information, intimidation by ~~the~~ expulsions, and increase in operational costs. A month after the expulsion of Newsweek's Francois Sully, NBC Far Eastern correspondent, James Robinson, was ordered out, ostensibly for visa violations, but more directly as a "a matter of mere calumnies and gratuitous insults", according to a Department of Interior communique. The Vietnamese government disliked several of his television tapes, including one of Diem's forces torturing Viet Cong prisoners.

U. S. Embassy attempts to rescind both expulsion orders were only scoffed at and the day after Robinson's exit ~~the~~ the Directorate General of Information released a warning about "tendencious" reporting to Associated Press Correspondent Malcom Malcolm Browne.

On Sept. 24, the press was further warned to expect "blockage, temporary or permanent, of entry into Viet Nam of mercenary publications peddling propaganda harmful to the national cause." While no official ban on the importation of specific publications was announced, the Sept. 17th Newsweek was the last issue to be sold in Vietnam. Two issues of the New Yorker, covering Vietnam and a biography of President Diem, and the Life magazine article on Madame Nhu were also banned.

A month ago the government announced a seventy percent tax on call all cable costs and telephone calls.

The "war-to-get-the-news" was sucintly summarized by John Stirling of The Observer of London, when he wrote, "There is between the two sides (Western press and Vietnamese government) a deep, almost unbridgeable gulf of misunderstanding."

It is perhaps an ironical twist that President Diem in an October 1 address to the National Assembly described the fighting against the Communist guerrillas as a "war where the front is everywhere and nowhere, where ~~the~~ ideas play a role as decisive as arms..."

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Note to Ed: Because of the tense and delicate situation with the government, it is ~~perhaps~~ understandable that information for the article was gathered on a non-attributable basis.