

We Get Tough, The Viets Lean To Neutralism

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SAIGON.

A high-ranking American Official on a fact-finding mission recently was eating dinner with a Vietnamese couple both staunchly anti-Communist, who were decrying the marked deterioration of the internal political situation.

The American official asked if they were not encouraged "after recent events," meaning the bombing of North Vietnamese military installations.

The Vietnamese wife chipped at her strawberry finger-nail polish and asked, "What happened recently?"

The Vietnamese husband responded, "Oh, you mean the aggression against North Viet Nam?"

The American official was flabbergasted at their reaction, which indicated how much more worried they were about Saigon politics than they were reassured by the bombing of North Viet Nam.

The bombing raids including the largest one last week—came paradoxically when the internal political situation is potentially ripe for the acceptance of a negotiated settlement with the Reds.

As the American military posture grows tougher, the internal political line is leaning toward neutralism.

These two trends are contradictory—if Washington intends to prosecute the war to total victory. But if Washington intends to negotiate, the tough military stance would be considered enough to represent an apparent American military victory, although the Communists would be admitted into a coalition government—the prelude to neutralization.

These are the factors which are worrying the anti-Communist Vietnamese since the first retaliatory bombing of North Viet Nam Feb. 7:

¶The unimpeded rise of the militant Buddhist Institute, now a political force second only to the Viet Cong Communist political machine, and the Buddhists' official appeal for peace, "and for Vietnamese to stop killing fellow Vietnamese." The fear is that this emotional issue could in time cause the collapse of the South Vietnamese armed forces and government.

¶At least one quarter of the ministers in the new government formed Feb. 16 are considered "Buddhist ministers;" another one-quarter are considered pro-French, if not French agents; the remaining half—described by one observer as "the best-intentioned bunch of nitwits ever to fill a cabinet"—are considered weak personalities who would easily bend under prevailing political pressure from pro-neutralist factions. No element appears prepared to resist the Buddhists politicians or other pro-neutralist factions.

¶This potentially pro-neutralist trend in the civilian government was relatively unimportant as long as the Vietnamese Armed Forces Council, considered to represent anti-Communist power, acted as a super-government. But, with the Feb. 19 coup attempt and subsequent dismissal of Lt. Gen. Nguyen Khanh as commander-in-chief, the Council diminished in political importance. Gen. Khanh used the armed forces as an anti-Communist political counterbalance to the pro-neutralist Buddhists mass power. Now that he is gone, the generals are fighting among themselves; at least one General has slipped over to the political side of the Buddhist Institute, and is indirectly calling for peace.

DIVIDED OBSERVERS

¶A peace movement—labeled communist-inspired by the government—has surfaced in Saigon. The movement has circulated a petition calling for a ceasefire without conditions—without demanding a stop to Communist aggression—and has obtained the signatures of 471 persons—many of them the most respected in Vietnamese society. Thirty-five signers have been arrested. The movement is now believed to be whipping up students and workers to spearhead its cause through street demonstrations protesting the arrival of South Korean troops—and by implication calling for the withdrawal of American troops.

¶The anti-Communist pillars of Vietnamese society and government are in disarray. The Catholics, usually anti-Communist in viewpoint, are divided and are discredited since the abortive Feb. 19 coup. The American officials in Saigon are generally discredited by both the Left-wing faction, who hold them responsible for the Feb. 19 coup attempt, and by the Right-wing faction, who feel U. S. policymakers have made a general mess of the political situation, so jeopardizing the war effort. The most important body—the armed forces—is suffering from high desertion rates; the fear is that a "push for peace" might cause its collapse.

Fewer and fewer anti-Communists are doing less and less about the Communist political subversion—which is now considered to be—the Red's major reaction to the American military offensive.

"It is a principle that the hotter the military war, the more the Communists will push the political subversives," said one counter-guerrilla expert.

The pessimists among foreign diplomats and observers here consider the anti-Communist war lost. The optimists believe the trend can still be reversed with a great deal of luck.

The pessimists fear the Communists in the provinces—and the Buddhists in Saigon and the major cities—will begin street demonstrations demanding peace at any price. They argue bombing North Viet Nam is now incidental; American policymakers, if they intend to hold South Viet Nam, must send in American combat troops.

The peace movement is the most discussed development in Saigon. Vietnamese families refuse to hold piastre currency; the price of gold has risen up to 30-40 per cent during the past three weeks." One business man said the Vietnamese are burying gold outside Saigon, hoping "to get it out in the confusion before the Communists take over."

Other housewives have begun stockpiling rice. The price has risen sharply, although it normally drops following the Chinese New Year.

Vietnamese friendships of long years standing are being broken up because of the tense political climate. "Who are our friends—and who are our enemies?" one young Vietnamese housewife pondered.

"I have to ask myself that each time before I send out dinner invitations."

Another depressed woman sighed, "It is a time when each Vietnamese has two feet and two faces."