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About South Vietnam

In the November issue of ONE MAN'S OPINION we presented a rough index of the present degree of Communist strength—according to our estimate—in almost all of the nations of the world.

The final list on this scoreboard was of those few (and mostly weak) countries where firm, honest, and continued opposition to Communism could still be taken for granted. We began this roll call with South Korea and Formosa. But to the surprise of some of our readers, we did not include South Vietnam at all. This appraisal by omission was based on some serious doubts as to the true state of affairs in the Saigon government. The following article, which we had not seen at that time, and which is now reprinted by permission from the ECONOMIC COUNCIL LETTER, will help to explain and justify those doubts.

The author, Hilaire du Berrier, is a native of North Dakota. He has spent most of the years since 1937 in the Far East—three of them as a prisoner of the Japanese. He has been thoroughly familiar with affairs in Indochina under France, Japan, the Communists, and the regime that followed the fall of Dien Bien Phu. His article raises many important questions. Among them: Have some of the most ardent anti-Communists in America again been gutted by clever Communist propaganda, and by the machinations of Communist sympathizers within our government?

THE STORY OF DEMOCRACY'S FAILURE in South Vietnam is also the story of President Ngo dinh Diem. Theoretically the two came in together via the Geneva Accord of 1954. With them, as a result of military defeat at Dien Bien Phu, French influence ended and American began.

Diem was raised in the north, son of a nine-button Mandarin, or court official, under the Emperor Kai Dinh. He had little or no contact with the common people, was never a leader in any of the Nationalist parties that struggled for independence. Of his five brothers, one was killed by the Communists. Thuc became a bishop. Luyen is now Ambassador to Britain. Can, known as the gangster, represents his brother along the northern frontier. Nhu, whose wife is known as the Eva Peron of South Vietnam, is in Saigon, as advisor to the President.

Life Magazine, usually not daunted by research, said of Diem on May 13, 1957, "Just how Ngo dinh Diem came to power has never been divulged." Hans Morgenthau, of the University of Chicago, spoke of him as "a man who two years ago was little more than a name pulled out of a hat by a few desperate Washington officials."

How Ngo Came To Power . . .

The story is simple. In 1952 all Vietnamese Nationalists looked to America to drive the French out of Vietnam, as they had out of Syria. Every ambitious Vietnamese with mobility, i.e., the price of a ticket, wanted a passport to go to America and seek backing for a free Vietnam under himself. Diem was so insignificant that the French did not fear him. He had no party, was aloof, a devout



aristocrat. When asked a question he usually answered to something else. They saw no reason to fear him, so he was permitted to go to America. In America he met a group of left-wing intellectuals who made him their protege in "the struggle against colonialism." A professor who wanted to be an Orientalist took him up. A former Austrian Socialist leader, naturalized American, made Diem and Vietnamese independence his business. A small pool of intellectuals was formed to write articles glorifying Ngo dinh Diem, quoting each other as authorities. Justice William O. Douglas met the new "find" at a luncheon, at which Senator Mike Mansfield was present (see *Harpers Magazine*, January, 1956). The Senator had met Diem in 1953 and has been a consistent champion of his. Cardinal Spellman was reported to be behind him also.

Support In Vietnam . . .

At this point Vietnamese Nationalist leaders back in Saigon were ready to embrace him also. A stream of letters and clippings had come back to convince them that Diem had American support. Very well, if he could get America to oust the French and, if accepting Diem, for a time at least, was the price they had to pay, they were willing. He had no party; they could always put in a strong Nationalist later.

A French journalist named Lucien Bodard started boosting him. Bodard wanted an American-supported Premier to push the fight against Ho chi Minh, the Communist in the north. Though Diem's sole war effort during Japanese hostilities consisted of hiding Japanese from the French, Bodard never missed a chance to advance him.

Then came the crushing defeat of Dien Bien Phu in the spring of 1954. Prince Buu Loc was the last pro-French premier. Monsieur Georges Bidault suggested to the Emperor Bao Dai, then known as Chief of State, that he appoint Ngo dinh Diem, the man "the Americans wanted."

Appointed By The Emperor . . .

On July 7, 1954, Diem became premier of the southern half of his divided country. Roughly 11 1/2 million citizens remained to him, against 13 1/2 million under Ho chi Minh in the north. The Accord stipulated that the two Vietnams vote in July, 1956, to decide under which camp they would be reunited. Southern Nationalists were not discouraged by the disparity in numbers. They were free at last, and they figured by mid-1956 enough northerners would be disillusioned by Communism to swing the vote their way.

On bended knees Diem swore allegiance to the Emperor. He promised the Empress to save the dynasty for her son, and boarded a plane for Saigon. Pope Pham cong Tac, leader of the Cao Dai sect, hurriedly gathered followers for a "spontaneous" demonstration, to give the impression that the new President of the Council was popular.

So it was that a northerner, neither native to the south nor with a following there, came to govern South Vietnam on nothing stronger than the fact that a few American Marxist-socialists and some middle-of-the-road anti-colonialists and conservative Catholics were behind him. Vietnamese believed that America's being "in the game" was insurance enough against Diem's abuse of power



or France's return.

Ngo Takes Over . . .

Their disillusionment was sudden. The leaders, for whom independence was their due, were pushed aside. No dissenting voice was tolerated, which left only sycophants and the President's brothers and in-laws eligible for office. The ascetic, intolerant Diem felt himself more and more isolated. He became suspicious of everyone. He drew closer to his brother Nhu, whose hands held all the political threads of the country. Madame Nhu became the President's hostess. Behind Madame Nhu in a web of palace intrigue was the figure of her mother, Madame Tran van Chuong, formerly a Councilor of the French Union. Madame Chuong and her husband, one of Bao Dai's ministers, had amassed a fortune. With one daughter married to Diem's most powerful brother, the other daughter's husband was soon made Minister of the Interior, and Madame Chuong sent her husband to Washington as Ambassador. Vietnamese with even less voice in their government under Diem than they had under the French referred to their President as "the parachuted—dropped on them from above, by a foreign power—without roots in their soil."

Native leaders were suppressed or driven abroad. American agents, advisers and political officers flocked into the country, but they were partisans of Diem the man, rather than of South Vietnam the country. The rule was that anyone anti-Diem was anti-American. If an anti-Communist Nationalist tried to alert the Americans, he was turned over to Diem's police. Wearing blinkers against the smoldering unrest, the insulated Americans replied to all criticism, "But there is no one but Diem."

And Consolidates His Rule . . .

Two political-religious sects, the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai, had private armies and policed their own areas against Communist infiltration. Another private army, the Binh Xuyen, under General Le van Vien, controlled Cholon, the Chinese city where gambling flourished, just outside Saigon. Because of Le van Vien's reputation as vice-king, the Binh Xuyen were attacked first. Then Diem moved on to break the Hoa Hao and the Cao Dai. To gain personal power Diem weakened and alienated these groups that could have presented a united front with him against Communism. He plunged the country into civil war, killing or exiling native leaders. Lopping off the tops of these three groups drove them into an underground alliance where they are still operating and, if anything, gaining strength. Time can prove that these moves were unwise.

Hate spread. To divert it, Diem started a campaign against the French, playing on old grudges. Short-sighted American officers joined in, running a popularity contest against the French. It was unwise. The gains were short-term, on a purely local field. The alliance against the common enemy to the north was forgotten. One hundred thousand French troops were pulled home. Some twenty-five thousand civilians followed. Restaurants closed, twenty-five thousand Vietnamese were thrown out of work. Over night Saigon awoke to the fact that withdrawal of the French army, navy, and airforce was not to be followed by the arrival of an equal number of protecting Americans. The hundred and twenty-five thousand French that arrived in France, literally ordered out of Vietnam



by Secretary Dulles in April of 1955, were bitterly anti-American, and a potential source of poison in NATO. Alarmed Vietnamese saw themselves suddenly defenseless. To flee the country they needed a passport with an exit visa. Ten thousand dollars or its equivalent in jewels became Madame Nhu's price for escape, according to them.

The Same Old Formula ...

With the French gone, Diem lost his whipping boy. He had told the Emperor to stay out of the country and to let him handle things. He launched a campaign against the absent Emperor, raised a few hitherto unknown hangers-on to temporary importance on a Revolutionary Committee, under Nguyen bao Toan, Ho hen Son, and Nhi Lang.

A constitution was promised, and a vice-president. Always just ahead was the promise of liberalization and a voice in government. Bodard, the journalist who worked two years to push Diem's appointment, had long since been expelled from the country. Very few of Diem's old friends remained. In the voting to decide whether Bao Dai or Diem should run the country, Diem offered no alternative to himself, as though the presidency were his to dispose of. Police made house to house visits "to instruct the voters." Ballots were green (unlucky color) on one end for Bao Dai, red (lucky color) on the other for Diem. No campaigning for Bao Dai was permitted. The ballot was torn in two, one end placed in an envelope (transparent), and a policeman escorted the voter to the polls.

Back in America a high-pressure public relations firm, paid by the American taxpayer through aid money, literally flooded the country with glowing but completely false reports of Diem's popularity and South Vietnam's new strides towards democracy. The taxpayer was conditioned for longer and heavier appropriations.

And The Same Results . . .

Shortly after the Emperor was ousted the Revolutionary Committee disappeared. Nguyen bao Toan popped up in America, an exile. The skeleton of Ho hen Son was found near Saigon in February of 1957. Nhi Lang is now in exile in Cambodia, harassed as an "anti-American."

March 4, 1956, was set as the date to elect a Constituent Assembly to draw up the Constitution. Only "approved candidates" were permitted to run. One Dai Viet, a member of the anti-Communist party that had carried the fight for independence for years, managed to slip through the screening and was elected, but disappeared immediately afterwards. A special refugee village constituency was created for Madame Nhu; even so, she polled less than 5,000 votes out of a possible 25,000. Her refugee village is maintained, idle, on American aid dole. Its inhabitants are available and used for the "spontaneous" demonstrations mounted for Diem's comings and goings and the visits of American VIPs.

When the hand-picked assembly had written the Constitution as dictated, it was turned into a legislative assembly, and a long list of decrees that have aided only the Communists and alienated Southeast Asia followed. The leader of the Dai Viet Nationalists reached Washington through the



aid of the American Ambassador to tell his story, but Senator Mansfield refused to see him. The black-out on all reports adverse to Diem was complete, but throughout Southeast Asia anti-American sentiment was on the rise.

One by one Diem's enemies and opposition leaders were lured for talks, under truce, and nabbed. In mid-1956 such a trap was set up for Bacut, the Hoa Hao leader, by Vietnam's then Ambassador to Tokyo, Nguyen ngoc Tho (arrested as a Communist in 1945 and father of a noted communist student agitator in Paris). Bacut was seized. Only one witness dared appear at his trial. He was summarily guillotined. The Hoa Hao swore to revenge their chief and are in open revolt today. As a reward for trapping Bacut, Nguyen ngoc Tho was made Vice President.

Communists In The Saddle . . .

As this is written, five other Southern Vietnamese are under sentence of death in Saigon. They came in voluntarily in response to pamphlets promising safe conduct. But on arrival they were told that there was a time limit to the offer and that it had already expired! It is a common observation that under the French a few Vietnamese were in prison, now the number runs into thousands. Communists are running "universities" in the prisons.

In late 1956 Diem desperately staved off all native hate a while longer by passing a decree forcing nationality on all foreigners born in the country. It was retroactive, barred all who refused nationalization from eleven trades, and was directed against the million Chinese who control South Vietnam's economy. But also affected were the Laotians and Cambodians. The word went out to sabotage Diem's economy. Reaction spread to the three million Chinese in Thailand, the Chinese communities of Singapore and Hong Kong and the Philippines. In Laos and Cambodia neutralism took a jump as enough arms passed from Red China to mount an entire new division in the south. Amidst rumors of vast transfers of capital abroad by Diem's family, banknote scandals and rice deals with the Reds, the shortage of banknotes hit Saigon. Imports piled up in the warehouses and unemployment increased. Firms went bankrupt. Against this background Asia holds America responsible for "her man."

While America Feeds The Horse

By this time Diem dared not backtrack, could only go ahead. As the ship started to founder Vietnamese asked themselves if former important Reds who had flattered their way into key posts of government were not responsible for these decrees, by which only South Vietnam's enemies seemed to profit. It was pointed out that men trying to quit the Red camp to rally to the south were invariably arrested by their own former Communist leaders, for acts committed under them in the north, as soon as they reached Saigon. Is it true then that rallying to a new standard is impossible —and only Red infiltration possible?

On February 20, 1957, an armored car regiment seven miles from Saigon prepared to move on the capital. They were betrayed and their leaders executed. "It is no use," said the Vietnamese, "Diem has so much American money to bribe informers. The country will fall to the Reds before we can ever move in."



On February 22 a schoolboy shot at the President and missed. Papers have not mentioned him since, though it is known that it was not a Communist plot, and the boy has refused ten million piastres, if he will tell who backed him.

Shortly after the “assassination try” Diem selected a non-dangerous opponent and labeled him “the legal opposition,” as a sop to American opinion, but two priests were sent to prison for the mildest criticism of Diem and the last Catholic journal in the country was suppressed. With this, Diem took off for America in a desperate search for money. The Madison Avenue “coca-cola campaign,” as Vietnamese call his press-agenting in America, was tremendous, but the increased aid he sought in shock-treatment amounts was not forthcoming.

Since then he has made junkets to Korea, Thailand, and Australia. His objective: the place of leader left vacant by Magsaysay’s death as “leader of Southeast Asia.” Hatred and contempt for Diem in neighboring countries, and hatred of America for having imposed and supported him, is strong enough to threaten any alliance we may try to set up under his attempted leadership.

A paid propaganda campaign could convince American public opinion that Diem is indispensable in far away Southeast Asia—and may keep him in power. But your Vietnamese, there on the ground, knows truth from fiction. He sums it up, *“Unless we can get Diem out and install a broad government with popular support, the Reds will come in. Ung ngoc Ky, who is Ho chi Minh’s underground leader in Saigon, boasts that he can take over when he chooses. Unless America heeds us he will do it.”*