



VIET NAM THE UNHEARD VOICES

Viet Nam: The Unheard Voices
Luce Don



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... by two young Americans
... and the people

MMER
Kennedy

VIET NAM THE UNHEARD VOICES

**DON LUCE
& JOHN SOMMER**

**With a Foreword by
Senator Edward M. Kennedy**

"Don Luce and John Sommer are two extraordinary young men. . . . They and a few others became a part of the [Vietnamese] people, listened to them, spoke for them, worked for them, loved and understood them, at a time when a thoughtless war was rolling over them."

— **Edward M. Kennedy, from the
Foreword**

"Don Luce and John Sommer have written the most important first-hand memoir to come out of the American experience in Viet Nam; it is also the most fascinating. . . . Their book is a story of people, of the tragic sympathy the Vietnamese have for Americans despite the suffering our acts have caused, and of the incapacity of Americans to understand the human dimension of the conflict."

— **John T. McAlister, Jr.**

This is no ordinary book about Viet Nam. Written by two men who speak Vietnamese fluently, it reports the words of the people — the unheard voices of Viet Nam — as both authors remember them from many years of living and working in south Viet Nam's hamlets, cities,

(Continued on back flap)

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Viet Nam – The Unheard Voices

VIET NAM—
The Unheard Voices

By DON LUCE and
JOHN SOMMER

Foreword by
EDWARD M. KENNEDY

Cornell University Press

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To the people of Viet Nam

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FOREWORD

Don Luce and John Sommer are two extraordinary young men. They were not involved in the Viet Nam war as we know it, although they and their colleagues personally lived through this tragedy—and still do. They were not on the side of a great power or a nationalistic movement, although they, too, have fought for others—and still do. Luce and Sommer became a part of Viet Nam. But most importantly, they and a few others became a part of the people, listened to them, spoke for them, worked for them, loved and understood them, at a time when a thoughtless war was rolling over them.

I met Don Luce when he testified so eloquently before the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Refugees in 1965. By 1967, he no longer could tolerate the suffering that our good intentions brought to the people of Viet Nam. So he left, returned to this country and spoke of things that America had lost sight of, and of a war that we were losing, the computers and statistics to the contrary. Now he has gone back.

John Sommer traveled with me through Viet Nam in 1968. With his knowledge of the country and its language he helped me to speak with the Vietnamese refugee, the farmer, and those women and children so horribly injured by war. In Sommer's quiet manner I found great strength, but more than that, I found a dedication in the truest sense to Viet Nam and her future.

Viet Nam—The Unheard Voices is a different story. Had the voices to which the authors refer been heard, or at least not dis-

missed, Viet Nam might have been different. Yet, neither Luce nor Sommer is anxious to focus on villains. They claim no prescience for themselves in the early days. But they do make the case that most now recognize: ". . . the fault is more ours . . . for it was our duty to understand before we intervened in such great force."

It is my hope that the war in Viet Nam will soon end and American soldiers will soon be able to leave that land. But it is also my hope that we leave with a moral—this adventure in Southeast Asia is not sad or regrettable simply because it failed. Fighting men died on both sides, and hundreds of thousands of civilians died on both sides, because in haste we relied primarily on the tools of war to attack social problems and to win political allegiance for an unstable government in a distant place. That did not do in this case. It will not do in the future.

EDWARD M. KENNEDY

Washington, D.C.

January 1969

PREFACE

When we first volunteered to serve in Viet Nam—one of us in 1958, the other in 1963—that little country was virtually unknown to most Americans, including ourselves. We went there largely through happenstance. An organization called International Voluntary Services (IVS) was sending young volunteers, most of them recent college graduates, to help in various countries of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

Founded as a private, nonprofit organization in 1953, IVS was led by persons drawn from various religious denominations, from the academic world, and from groups interested in rural development. These men were committed to the idea that dedicated young people could make a contribution to both international understanding and economic development by living with the people of newly independent nations and assisting them in common programs of agriculture, education, and general community action.

Several years later, as the American Peace Corps was being established, largely on the IVS model, IVS was evolving in various directions. From an organization concerned primarily with agriculture and other rural programs, it was expanding its scope to include teams in education (primarily for the teaching of English and science), youth activities (mainly in social-action programs), and urban or community development. From an exclusively American organization, it was internationalizing to include in its ranks volunteers from Britain, Canada, France, Haiti, India, Israel, Japan, Korea, the Netherlands, the Philippines, and Taiwan. Having served in

fourteen countries and being currently encouraged to work in others, IVS now numbers about two hundred members, with some eighty of these in Viet Nam.

IVS had first come to Viet Nam in 1957, during the relatively peaceful period after what is now called the First Indochina War. Few would have expected then that an even more brutal war would break out. When we decided to cast our lot with IVS in Viet Nam, we were simply seeking an experience in which we could both help others and learn ourselves.

Like all IVS volunteers, we were required to serve for a minimum of two years abroad, and we were given an orientation that placed considerable emphasis on training in the local language. We received a living allowance adequate to cover our expenses overseas, plus an additional \$80 a month that was deposited in our banks at home. Financing for IVS projects may come from either private or government sources, under contract with the host country. The money for our program was funded through the United States Agency for International Development (AID) and the South Vietnamese government, though for some specific projects we received support from private agencies as well.

Our jobs in Viet Nam, we soon found out, were to increase sweet potato production and to assist in the opening of primary schools in the villages. Politics, in fact, seemed quite irrelevant, and the challenges and rewards of our work were such that we decided to stay well beyond the initial two years of our contracts. Because we were trained to speak Vietnamese and lived among the people of the country, we increasingly came to know and admire them. We ourselves became far more committed than we had ever anticipated.

Over the years, however, the sufferings of the Vietnamese increased as warfare returned to the country. As the range of our own experiences also broadened, we began to see unnecessary mistakes being made by our American government in response to the new conditions. Our early humanitarian motives for wishing to serve in Viet Nam were being thwarted. Some of these frustrations we could chalk up to experience and practical education for ourselves. Others we could not. It became inevitable that our commitment to Viet Nam would take on political overtones. Finally, as we saw

too many opportunities for reforms being passed by, and as the situation became increasingly desperate, we realized that we as individuals could no longer continue in our same roles in South Viet Nam. We knew that we could not long stay away from that country and that we would somehow return there. But in the fall of 1967 we left, determined to share our experiences with the American people.

This, then, is a story about Viet Nam. It is a true story, told for a purpose. If it is too late to correct mistaken policies of the past, our fervent hope is to avoid similar mistakes in the future. For this is not a story intended merely to bemoan the sufferings of war. Our purpose is to demonstrate that understanding people is the key to successful policy, that failure to understand them and respond to their needs is to fail in one's goals, and finally, that a great America cannot win hearts and minds by technology and material means alone. A concern for the human spirit is not a luxury; it is an essential.

We have attempted here to reflect the feelings of our Vietnamese friends and colleagues as they were expressed to us during our years of living and working in Viet Nam. We do not claim any foolproof solutions to the problems—or more accurately, dilemmas—of Viet Nam, and we have enjoyed the benefits of hindsight. We still feel that Americans can and should play a large and helpful role in the affairs of peoples of developing countries, though we would prefer to see this role fulfilled in an international framework. It is not the fact, then, but the quality of the American role abroad that concerns us. That Asians are not Americans is recognized perhaps in an intellectual sense, but not yet in an intuitive one. We still have much to learn about other countries and other peoples.

Government policies, perforce, are made by people other than those who are affected by them. In Viet Nam, our job, in a sense, was to bridge the gap between the makers of policy and the people affected. But the voices of the Vietnamese people—and our own as well—were not often heard. Now we raise them again, in hopes that those who have erred can learn from past mistakes, and that those who have suffered and given of their lives will not have done

so entirely in vain. The Vietnamese people have much to teach all of us.

We owe the reader two small explanations. First, to facilitate the style of writing we have used the first person plural throughout, even when a particular anecdote or conversation has involved only one of us. The book, though presented in this form, is a composite of our largely separate and individual experiences in Viet Nam. Second, we have used fictitious names for certain Vietnamese friends and colleagues out of consideration for their safety.

We wish to offer our deepest appreciation to all those who have made this book possible. We thank the Project on International Relations of East Asia, of the Center of International Studies at Cornell University, for wholehearted support, both professional and logistic. We are also indebted to our colleagues in the Viet Nam Education Project and its sponsors in the United Methodist Church for their interest and encouragement.

In a more general sense, but in no way a less significant one, we want to thank all our friends and colleagues of International Voluntary Services: the founders, directors, and staff, who gave us the opportunity to serve and who made possible our entire overseas experience; and our comrades in Viet Nam, those with whom we have served over the years, who have shared our frustrations and joys, and who have enriched, each in his own way, the contents of the present volume. Last, but hardly least, we wish to emphasize our boundless debt to hundreds of Vietnamese friends and coworkers. From them we have learned not only about Viet Nam, but also about ourselves. Any mistakes in this volume are our own, but the book itself, we would like to think, is theirs.

D. L.
J. S.

January 1969

Viet Nam ~ The Unheard Voices

*Our enemy is not a man;
if we kill the man, with whom do we live? . . .
Our enemy is inside each one of us.*

—PHAM DUY, a folksinger of Viet Nam

[1]

CAUGHT IN THE MIDDLE

IVS Volunteers in Viet Nam

Dogs barked and children peeked around the corners of their houses. It wasn't often that a jeep drove into Ha Lan in 1958. No one in the village owned a car, although quite a few of the men had learned to drive in the French army. It was even less often that Ong Tay (Mr. Westerner) came. But it was exciting. The motor fascinated the children and they fought over who would ride in the front seat from the priest's house back to the village gates.

"The wild pigs are in the corn again," Father Nam, the priest, complained.

"We'll tell Mr. Paul," we promised, knowing that Paul had gone hunting in that area several times.

"Mr. Foul never hits them." Father Nam, like most Vietnamese, had trouble pronouncing Paul's name.

We smiled and followed Father Nam into his tiny home. An old table flanked by wooden benches dominated the center of the room. The dirt floor had a polished look from the thousands of bare feet that had come to bring news of births, deaths, weddings, and all other matters concerning the state of affairs in Ha Lan.

"Drink tea," Father Nam ordered as we sat down at the table. This used up his entire English vocabulary, and somehow we were envious that *we* had not taught him the two words. It was only after an hour of drinking tea and discussing in Vietnamese the problems of the Highland village that Father Nam asked why we had come.

"At the agricultural experiment station," we explained, "we have tested sweet potato varieties from several different countries. We have found two varieties that produce more than any local variety

we can find. Perhaps you would like to try them." We showed him the two bags of potatoes. "This one is from Japan and this one is from Taiwan."

Father Nam studied them carefully, then asked one of the young women to cook three potatoes of each of the new varieties and three of his own potatoes.

Several cups of tea later, Chi Tu brought three plates of potatoes. Using both hands to be polite, she put the plates on the table. Excitement mounted as the priest methodically cut the potatoes into bite-sized pieces. He crossed himself and tasted each variety; then, waiting for the suspense to build up, he spoke solemnly: "Needs salt."

We all laughed. One comes to appreciate the gentle Vietnamese humor and flair for the dramatic, and Father Nam did not allow this mood to break. He summoned two of the older boys, Em Loc and Em Tan, quickly tied napkins over their eyes, and passed the three plates around for their judgment. Japanese 101 was the winner, with the local variety a close second. Em Loc spat third-place Taiwan 47 onto the floor to the amusement of everyone except his mother, who cuffed him behind the ears.

"The farmers will plant one row of your Japanese variety," Father Nam announced. We smiled. It remained only to set a date for distribution of the new sweet potato cuttings and to designate one person in the village who would be responsible for seeing that each farmer got his share.

Encouraging farmers to plant improved varieties of sweet potato is a typical assignment for the volunteers in International Voluntary Services. It is also a relatively simple one. Vietnamese farmers are receptive to innovation, particularly when little risk is involved. With new varieties, which can be planted in one or two experimental rows beside the old variety, farmers are not taking much of a gamble. Even more important, they don't usually have to follow any new practices, invest a lot of extra money, or change their pattern of life. Introduction of new varieties is thus one of the simplest ways of promoting economic development at both village and national levels.

Economic development has always been one of the principal goals

of IVS volunteers in Viet Nam. Because of this, even as late as 1963 and 1964 it often seemed as though the war itself hardly existed. The problems we faced were mostly technical: What was the best way to dig a canal? How should teachers be trained for village school assignments? How could one maintain classroom discipline with eighty students in an English class? Such questions would arise in almost any modernization effort in almost any developing country. Of course we also had problems with unresponsive bureaucrats and with corruption, but in these respects too we knew that Viet Nam was not unique, and we could work in spite of them.

Around 1963, one volunteer agriculturalist was looking for a way to help the people of Minh Hoa, a large village located in a rice-growing area near the Gulf of Siam. The soil there was poor due to a high acid content, and salt-water intrusion during the dry season made it necessary for the villagers to go several kilometers to find fresh water. Furthermore, although the village headquarters was a center for many local businesses, there was no road or canal to connect it with the nearby hamlets. The people of Minh Hoa thus decided to dig a canal. From the experiences of other villages, they knew that a canal would facilitate drainage, thereby reducing the acidity of the soil and allowing increased rice production. They also hoped that the canal would provide fresh drinking water during the dry season. But perhaps most important, the canal as a transportation route would make it easier for them to market their goods and to visit their relatives.

The village chief in Minh Hoa was an exceptional person. During the war against the French, he had been a province chief with the Viet Minh. The rigors of Viet Minh life and the guerrilla's typical identification with the rural people made him ideally suited for his present job. He always maintained a sense of direction and order, while at the same time understanding and empathizing with the villagers.

Les, the young volunteer, had first learned of the village chief through the hydraulics service in Rach Gia, the provincial capital. An engineer there had told him of the village's desire for a self-help project, and Les visited the chief at his small thatch office.

"We would like to dig a canal," the chief told Les. "We need

means of transportation and a way to drain the acidity from the soil. I am told that you understand the government's self-help project. Perhaps you could take our request back to Rach Gia. You see, this is the dry season. The farmers have now finished their rice harvest and there is little to do until the rains. They could use their labor to dig the canal. But we need food from the government because canal-digging is very hard work. Tonight we will have a village meeting. Can you come?"

Les nodded enthusiastically. After discussing how they could obtain foodstuffs for carrying out a self-help project, the chief took Les on a tour of the village. "The canal will start here and go six kilometers to the river," he explained. "The hydraulics service in Rach Gia has promised to help with the technical aspects."

Les had dinner at the chief's home—rice, a soup made from pork and some greens, and roasted river fish—and afterward they walked over to the village meeting house. A crowd had already gathered and men were arguing with one another, each intent on making his point understood by speaking a little louder than the rest. The village chief seated Les to one side and then went to the table at the front of the room. There was an immediate hush.

"I have studied your request for a canal very carefully," he began. "It will be possible, but it will require a lot of hard work on everyone's part. Tonight we can discuss some of the details. But first I would like to introduce the foreigner who is sitting over there." The village chief nodded toward the young American, and the villagers all stood and clapped. This is what they had done when the French were there, and respectful applause now came as a matter of course. Les half stood and then sat down, his face red with embarrassment. He saw no reason for the clapping and tried to make himself less conspicuous by slouching down in his chair.

"The young American is here to help us. He has explained the government's program of self-help to me, and we can obtain food if we dig the canal." Les wanted to object to this. He hadn't promised that they would get food. He had just explained how the program worked. But to interrupt would cause the village chief to lose face. The chief had passed to him the responsibility for getting the food.

By this time one of the men was standing, waiting for recogni-

tion. The chief saw him and gave permission for the man to speak.

"It has been a very bad season; the rice was very poor. We cannot dig without rice to feed ourselves."

"Yes," said another man, "and we need rice, not bulgur wheat like the government usually gives out. Bulgur makes us sick and—"

"You can always sell the bulgur for pig feed on the market and buy rice," the village chief cut in.

"Then we must get a lot of bulgur because its price is low and the price of rice is high," the second man replied.

"I live more than one kilometer from where the canal will be built," a third man complained. "Why should I dig?"

"Because," answered the chief, "you will benefit in the long run. It will still be easier for you to send your rice to market. The village will be more wealthy and your children will be able to go to a better school. If we are to have a canal, everyone must cooperate. Now I am going to ask you to make an important decision. We have had six meetings and if we are to have a canal we must stop talking and start digging. I ask that you give me full authority to make work assignments on the canal." This request caused a shuffling of feet, and neighbors looked at each other to see if there would be general agreement. But the village chief was popular, and the villagers realized that this was the best way to proceed. They agreed.

"Good," smiled the chief. "It is six thousand meters [four miles] from here to the river. There are one thousand families in the village. Each family will dig six meters of canal. The canal must be five meters wide and one and a half meters deep. Next week the hydraulics service from Rach Gia will come and mark out the path of the canal. Each six meters will be numbered. The numbers will be written on slips of paper and put in a hat. Then they will be drawn out and put beside the name of each family on the hamlet list."

Discussion went on into the night. There were a hundred details to be decided, but the basic organization had been established. Lee returned to Rach Gia the next day and talked with Vietnamese provincial officials who then went to Minh Hoa and made arrangements for provision of food in the form of cooking oil and bulgur wheat. (Bulgur wheat is a cereal product of high nutritional quality. Being a surplus commodity in the United States, it has been ex-

ported in huge amounts to Viet Nam. Unfortunately, however, few Vietnamese like to eat it, preferring rice instead. Attempts to demonstrate imaginative recipes for bulgur cookies and other delicacies have usually been unsuccessful, but at least the pigs like the wheat.)

Les visited Minh Hoa often, sometimes to help a family dig its six meters and sometimes to talk with the village chief. The chance to talk over problems with someone from outside seemed to clarify issues and to help the chief arrive at solutions. One problem was that the land was not exactly level, and some families had to dig more than one and a half meters deep. They were very unhappy about this, especially since others had to dig only one meter. Finally it was decided that the village chief would talk with provincial officials in Rach Gia about getting extra bulgur wheat for those farmers who had to dig deeper than the average.

Another problem was the heat, which made the workers thirsty. Young girls hurried back and forth with tiny buckets, but fresh water was far away and they could carry only a little. The villagers began to wonder whether the canal was so important after all.

Clearly something had to be done. The chief and his family, laboring over their own six-meter stretch, were also hot and irritated. Would such a small problem destroy the whole project? Suddenly the chief had an idea, and he tossed his shovel aside.

"We will take an oxcart and haul water in the large American cans [fifty-five-gallon drums] the government gave us," he said. "Old Tao [whose arm was lost in the war against the French] has been complaining because he cannot dig. Now he can take part. Yes, we can continue digging the canal!"

Two hours later, old Tao, beaming over his new responsibility, began the first of many oxcart trips up and down the canal bank. The diggers cheered as he came into sight, and Tao's smile broadened.

As problems came up, new meetings were organized or the village chief himself worked out solutions. Les's role was a subtle one: facilitating relations between village and provincial authorities and lending moral support to the people involved in the project. It was the subtlety that the villagers appreciated most. They did not need or want an exalted adviser or someone who would do the job for

them. These people, and especially the Minh Hoa village chief, were too proud for that. They were grateful simply for a volunteer who would come and help them in this way.

It was early morning on a day in 1966, and the situation was changing in Viet Nam. An old woman with wrinkled skin and toothless mouth was washing clothes by the well at Trai Hai, a resettlement area for the people who used to live in Kinh Dinh. When we asked some small children playing nearby how old the woman was, they said, "Oh, she is very old." In traditional Viet Nam, age is dignity. Our addressing her as "old woman" was thus a sign of respect.

"What are you doing, old woman?" we asked.

"I'm washing clothes," she said.

"They look like American clothes," we continued, noting that they were military green and in large sizes.

"Yes," she replied, but unenthusiastically, as if not wishing to discuss the matter further.

"Where did you live before, old woman?"

"Kinh Dinh."

"Where is that? Is it far?"

"Very far. It's over there." The old woman lifted her head from the clothes just long enough to nod in a northerly direction.

"What was it like there?" we continued.

"So much fighting . . ."

"But *before*; what was it like before?"

The old woman lifted her head, put down the shirt she had been pounding against the cement apron of the new well, and showed a glimmer of recalled joy through her wrinkles and her saddened brows. "Oh, *before*! Our life was good. There was peace. We had our rice fields, our buffalo, our chickens and pigs. Every year, when the season of afternoon rains was just beginning, we would plant the rice—all the women would line up in rows to plant the seedlings. When the sun was high above our heads—and very hot!—we would eat our lunch in the shade of the coconut trees and gossip among ourselves about all the village love affairs. We had to work very hard, but we were never afraid of anything then. At harvest time,

we all worked together—there was a lot of work—but after the harvest we had celebrations, the whole family together. Oh, that was fun!” Her eyes lit up as she chatted on about her children and how, when they were young, they had splashed about in the river. The cycle of life was punctuated by weddings and funerals and holidays on which ancestors were revered, special kinds of cakes were baked, special costumes were worn. The pattern of one’s days was predictable, hallowed by tradition. Life was secure.

“Why did you leave, old woman?”

“Things changed,” she replied, turning despondent again. “Strange people began to pass through our village and talk with us about revolution and changing the government. We did not know about such things, but some of the young people listened. Then sometimes there was shooting at night, and in the morning it was dangerous to go into our fields because of shells that had not yet gone off. Huge war machines drove through the rice fields. It became difficult to transport our rice into the market because the road was often destroyed. Soldiers came to our village, asking many questions and sometimes taking off the young men. Life became very difficult.”

“But when did you finally decide to leave?”

The old woman looked up with determination. “Our lives became sick with misery. Perhaps you cannot imagine what it was really like. Noisy airplanes flew overhead, dropping fire and bombs very near to us. Sometimes they dropped leaflets telling us to leave, but we did not want to leave our grandfathers’ land. More of our people were taken off, and we were threatened by many sides. The women had to do the work of the men. Some of the people had their crops turn brown from the sky medicine. It was hard to sleep at night. My son was arrested by the authorities; they said he had some bad leaflets. Our family was divided and very sad. We became too poor, and it was hard to take proper care of our ancestors’ tombs, especially after my son was taken away. We had no choice; we had to leave. We brought all we could here to the town. Oh, we were so tired, so tired.” She returned to her clothes, then suddenly looked up again and asked “Why are you here, Mr. Foreigner?”

“We’re here to help,” we said. “We would like to dig a well or clean out those dirty drainage ditches.”

"Oh," she said uncertainly. Then, finished with her washing, she picked up her clothes and made her way arduously up the embankment from the well toward her house. We helped her carry the basket of clothes to the top. She was surprised at the gesture, but did not thank us.

This kind of apathy was the most common characteristic of many of Trai Hai's people. They had never even bothered to name their settlement. Trai Hai, meaning literally "Camp Number Two," was the designation given by the local government refugee-service chief. Whenever the question of naming the camp arose, as it had from time to time during the year, the people responded, "Why bother? We'll be going back to our own village soon."

"Vui vui len, vui vui len." The girls sang the joyful rice-planting song—the words mean "happy, happy grow," but their flavor is untranslatable—as they placed the palm leaves on the bamboo frame to make the conical hats. The rhythm of the song seemed to fit what they were doing, and besides, it was rice-planting time in Phu Yen.

The girls were from a group of twenty-five refugees between thirteen and seventeen years old who had attended a 1967 training course on how to make conical hats. A woman who was very skillful at hat-making had come from another village and spent several days with the girls. It took a day to make a hat and each hat gave them fifty piasters (\$0.40) profit. The program had been developed by Tom, a young IVS refugee worker, and it had all the characteristics that a volunteer comes to admire in a project. It was not a giveaway program, it taught new skills, and it reached people who really needed help. Tom was concerned over the large number of girls in the refugee camps who, in need of money, were going to work in the local brothels. He felt that making conical hats offered them a more honorable and permanent source of income.

The girls liked it, too. It gave them a chance to be together and gossip and to have the independent feeling of a wage earner.

"What will happen when the war is over?" one of the younger girls asked as they finished singing.

"Oh, the men will all come home and there'll be lots of husbands." The girls all giggled at the thought.

"Well, I won't be wife number two," an older girl stated em-

phatically, referring to the old custom, still in practice, of some men having two wives.

"Humph, you'll be lucky if you get married at all," another girl quipped, and she dodged the bamboo switch that the older girl directed at her in mock anger.

The joking and singing continued until the sun began to set. Then the girls gathered their palm leaves, bamboo, and half-finished hats, and walked down the line of tin houses of the Chop Chai settlement. The smells and stuffiness of the camp contrasted sharply with the shady spot by the small stream where they went on sunny days to weave the hats. They huddled around the tables that their families had been fortunate enough to bring from the old village. A bowl of soup made from leaves the mother had picked and a bowl of rice were in the center of each table. The families dunked the leaves in fish sauce and thought, but seldom spoke, of the fish they wished they had.

For two months the girls made the conical hats. Each week the IVS volunteer bundled the hats and sent them away to be sold by a private group of Americans. The money came back and rice was bought for the girls. Everything seemed to be going well.

Then one night several rounds of gunfire hit the nearby American artillery camp, creating mass confusion. The American officers feared they were under a general attack, and to defend themselves they directed a return attack on Chop Chai with armored personnel-carriers mounted with .50-caliber machine guns. The bullets sliced through the tiny tin shacks and the heat twisted and even melted the metal sheets. The frightened refugees crawled into their carefully dug foxholes. A few ran out into the night.

The next morning Tom went to Chop Chai to see what he could do. The refugees were still milling around in a daze. Twelve had been killed, including some of the hatmakers. More than twenty others had been wounded. An angry woman approached Tom, crying, "We hate the Americans," and soon a small crowd gathered around him, demanding to know why their village had been destroyed.

When he drove back to town he talked to a soldier about the attack. "Well," the soldier said, "we thought the bullets came from

Chop Chai. Actually, they came from another direction, as we found out later when we studied the situation. But you know how it is when you're scared and there are bullets flying around. The major said we'd help the villagers to rebuild. We are awful sorry about this. I wish there was a way to keep from making mistakes."

Tom walked away. Understanding what had happened did not make him feel better. He went to see the major.

"It was a regrettable error. We're sorry. But it is none of your goddam business. Stay out of military affairs." The major had too many problems to spend time with an eighty-dollar-a-month volunteer, to him the equivalent of a private.

The refugees moved a third time. The conical-hat program never got started again. Somehow it didn't seem to matter anymore.

The accelerating tempo of war and the increasing hostility of many Vietnamese people toward Americans began to affect the work of IVS seriously after mid-1965. In the early years, security conditions peculiar to Viet Nam sometimes limited our travel into the countryside, but never critically. Americans at home, or even in Saigon, were often amazed at the extent to which volunteers could carry on work even when newspaper headlines were dwelling on the battles that seemed to rage everywhere. In the final months of the Ngo Dinh Diem regime, to be sure, psychological tensions were very high. Some Vietnamese were hesitant to associate too much with any Americans, both because of the U.S. policy of upholding the increasingly hated regime and because of the regime's own suspicions of Americans. Then, after Diem was overthrown in the 1963 *coup d'état*, government ministries were in a state of disorder, causing volunteers' projects to be frequently delayed or canceled. But the worst was still to come.

By 1964 and early 1965, many volunteers, though instructed to keep out of political controversies, became more concerned over the trend of the war. As the Viet Cong acted more and more boldly, and occasionally even engaged in small firefights in the towns, a number of IVSers privately felt that more pressure should be brought to bear by the United States. We should start bombing the North, some suggested, thinking it was foolish to let the Viet Cong

enjoy privileged sanctuary. If the Vietnamese Army could not lead its troops to fight, said others, then U.S. commanders should be placed in charge. Such suggestions, born out of desperation, were to prove embarrassing when we found out how wrong they were. At the time, however, an answer to a worsening situation had to be found. As individuals committed to the development of Viet Nam, we did not like to see our work destroyed. Our volunteer motto, to be sure, was "to work ourselves out of a job"; but we wanted to do this by instilling in our Vietnamese colleagues the ability to carry on, not by being forced out prematurely.

With escalation by both sides and the introduction of large American troop units in 1965, the role of the volunteer became gravely compromised. Late in that year, Pete Hunting, a good friend and outstanding IVS team leader for the Mekong Delta area, was riddled with bullets in a Viet Cong ambush along the road. Our earlier, almost blithe nonchalance about the war was deeply shaken by his death. Vietnamese friends were equally distressed. Since we were always much influenced by the attitudes of the Vietnamese with whom we lived and worked, we noted their shifts carefully. Some, of course, stiffened in their hatred of the Viet Cong. Others came to resent the Americans. In 1958, villagers had invited us in for tea and asked about life in the United States or jokingly offered to find us wives. Upon seeing us in 1967, these same villagers got up from their front steps, walked into their homes, and closed the door. Vietnamese who in 1958 had noted that Americans were unlike the French who had colonized Viet Nam, in 1967 added their voices to those who compared the Americans with the French. Vietnamese with whom we had gone to fun-filled work camps at Dalat, Can Tho, Ban Me Thuot, Bien Hoa, and Vung Tau were in 1967 saying that "the only way to help us now is to give us peace."

At the same time that the Vietnamese turned away from us, the U.S. Mission wanted us to cooperate more closely with American officials. But such associations made our role more difficult. The massive and increasingly resented American presence made it nearly impossible for volunteers to preserve a separate identity in the eyes of the Vietnamese. Even those Vietnamese who did appreciate the essentially neutral role of the IVS volunteer were afraid that close

association would compromise them in their relations with other Vietnamese. Being sympathetic to their problems, in this case, did not make matters any easier for us.

But the American Mission appreciated IVS, and there were many frustrated and friendly government bureaucrats who were happy to while away the hours with the comparatively young and very un-bureaucratic volunteers. Since we could speak Vietnamese and had friends at almost every level of the society, our participation on "the American team," as it came to be known, was widely solicited. This could be to our advantage, too, since we relied on U.S. government representatives for everything from transportation to project materials to moral support. But, at the same time, our associations with American power made us less appealing to Vietnamese who had learned to mistrust it and to fear it. In a 1966 efficiency move, the Office of Civilian Operations (OCO) was formed by the American Mission to incorporate all branches of the provincial civilian effort: JUSPAO* (information and psychological warfare), USAID† (economic assistance), and the CIA‡ (intelligence). This marriage of the information service, the economic aid program, and secret intelligence activities made many Vietnamese suspect even more any American who associated with "official" Americans. It also, unfortunately, curtailed the effectiveness of the many Americans in organizations like AID who were simply trying to bring economic improvements to Viet Nam.

In one province, a student group was anxious to obtain cement so that their organization could hold a work camp to lay the floor for an elementary school nearby. The only place to get the cement was from the OCO office, yet the students were afraid that by going there they would compromise the reputation of their group. They believed that the American provincial representative was a CIA agent, and to avoid becoming involved with the CIA they asked an IVS teacher to get the cement for them. But one of the volunteer's students, upon hearing the story through the student grapevine, immediately went to the IVS member and advised him not to get

* Joint United States Public Affairs Office.

† United States Agency for International Development.

‡ Central Intelligence Agency.

the cement. He feared that any IVS participation would brand IVS as CIA, too. This incident hurt the image of the American economic aid program and embittered the IVS member toward the "official American policy." Still worse, an elementary school continued with a damp dirt floor, and the Vietnamese students decided to hold a seminar instead of a work camp. The seminar's topic was "The Effects of the American Presence in Viet Nam." When OCO was later combined with the military into MACCORDS,* primarily for purposes of the pacification program, the move alienated the Vietnamese still further from the Americans. It also frustrated American civilians.

It was for these reasons that when American government officials praised IVS as being an integral part of the American effort in Viet Nam, we took it as a left-handed compliment. It seemed more and more left-handed as the American effort fell under increasing attack from our Vietnamese friends. Still, American VIP's would search out volunteers in order to learn from them or to pay recognition: Vice-President Hubert H. Humphrey, Ambassadors Henry Cabot Lodge, Maxwell Taylor, and W. Averell Harriman, Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman, and numerous Senators and Congressmen. Interestingly, it was usually the Senators and Congressmen who asked the questions, while the men from the administration only came to pay recognition. In either case, we were naturally honored, though all the attention added to the fear of some Vietnamese that we might be connected with the mysterious and ever suspect CIA.

It was an accumulation of all these problems and dilemmas that served as the backdrop to a critical meeting of IVS members held in Saigon over the Fourth of July weekend, 1967. The question in everybody's mind was whether we should continue our work in Viet Nam.

The living room of the IVS house was hot and stuffy as seventy volunteers crowded together. (There were some who did not choose to attend, mainly because they were unwilling to leave their

* Military Assistance Command, Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support.

jobs even for those three days.) One of us—then the IVS director for Viet Nam—had been asked to describe the latest confrontation with the U.S. Mission. The Dean of Hue University's Faculty of Letters, he began, had requested the services of an IVS English teacher. In response, IVS had assigned a talented volunteer with a master's degree and previous college teaching experience to that position. Soon afterward, the U.S. Mission, smarting from the university's involvement in the anti-American Struggle Movement in 1966, registered a protest, stating that "all assistance to Hue University was to be discontinued with the exception of some humanitarian aid to the hospital." All other American groups were forbidden to be associated with the university. The American government felt that IVS, given its contractual relationship, had a duty to follow U.S. policies. And the U.S. Mission policy toward Hue was threefold: first, Hue University was a nonuniversity since it "lacked a serious program of instruction"; second, there were problems regarding professors, rebellious students, and uncooperative rectors; and third, the United States government could not give assistance to a noninstitution. IVS, on the other hand, felt that its role was to respond to the needs of the Vietnamese as they themselves saw them, in this case as interpreted by the Dean of the Faculty of Letters. Most volunteers felt that as long as students continued coming to class the IVS teacher should stay and teach at Hue University. Several gave vent to their frustrations.

"Whether we like it or not, we're considered part of the American war effort rather than individuals just here to help," an English teacher complained. "We look like Americans. Most of us are Americans. And after two years, we'll return to America. We are just part of this huge American happening."

Several hands shot up, but before the moderator could call on anybody one of the refugee workers was already talking. "What bothers me is that by helping the refugees, we are just easing the conscience of the military when they make more refugees."

"Do you think General Westmoreland pays any attention to whether there's an IVSer around before the refugees are created?" countered another.

"Well, what about the case of Jon?" Jon had overheard American

soldiers radioing in from an operation to ask whether there was anyone who could take care of fifty VC suspects. When headquarters told them that La Hai had a refugee man who could handle the problem, the soldiers announced that they would then go ahead and burn the whole hamlet and bring in 350 people.

"Our job is to help people. If we spend all our time arguing about whether U.S. policy in Viet Nam is good or bad, we'll end up having only a stimulating intellectual exercise for ourselves. Is that why we're here?" The volunteer who spoke looked around the room, challenging someone to argue with him.

"I would like to say that there is a role for the IVS English teacher," said a teacher from Ban Me Thuot. "Viet Nam has little technical information in Vietnamese. The students can best get this material in English. Advanced study is best done in English. Besides, we are not just teaching language skills. We are teachers bringing new ideas. Look back into your own life. Who besides your parents influenced you more than—"

"And what happens to our students?" a delta volunteer interrupted. "They become interpreters for the Americans!"

"In whatever we do," said another volunteer, "we must always consider whether we are truly helping the Vietnamese people. They, after all, are our reason for being here. We want them to know that there are good Americans along with the bad."

"Whether the Vietnamese remember us or not doesn't matter," replied a girl who worked in Central Viet Nam. "The important thing is to leave behind some skills that will be useful to them. We shouldn't think so much about our own ego-gratification."

The discussion went on. Some IVSers said that their American identification was helpful. They could serve as intermediaries in getting supplies for projects useful to the Vietnamese, and the fact of having white skin helped to spur projects through Vietnamese government bureaucracies. "We are effective," they argued, "precisely because we are Americans in an increasingly American-oriented country."

Others, though not wishing to seem unpatriotic, simply did not believe in the wisdom of American policy. They wanted to disassociate themselves from it. "O.K., if you want to disassociate," some-

one challenged them, "why don't you give up your PX cards and why don't you stop going to the USO for ice cream? And you shouldn't hitch rides on military airplanes either, or send your letters through the Army Post Office." Some volunteers, in fact, felt so strongly that they did turn in their PX cards, though it meant they would have to pay more for films and toothpaste on the Vietnamese black market, which is where the Vietnamese shopped. The meeting demonstrated clearly that the volunteers not only differed among themselves, but also sensed basic dilemmas within themselves as individuals. In the entire meeting, only one resolution earned the wholehearted agreement of all the participants: a call for further internationalization of IVS so that Americans would no longer form the overwhelming majority. This seemed like one way to ease the political burden of being American.

The IVS leadership had prided itself on being the only predominantly American organization in Viet Nam to have a wholly Vietnamese advisory board. The Vietnamese were also pleased that they should be given a forum for advising Americans, since for them advising always seemed to be a one-way street. We had invited members of this board to attend the Fourth of July meetings and to give their opinions on how volunteers could best help the Vietnamese. We had asked them to be frank, and they were.

"You should not worry so much about having a political role," said one young teacher on the board. "Of course you are political, simply because you are in Viet Nam. Nothing is without politics in my country." Then he became more philosophical: "It is the function of IVS to work toward the improvement of social conditions, is it not? Well, that is a political activity. Politics and social participation are not independent processes." The volunteers listened with interest.

"The Vietnamese make no distinction between your organization and the U.S. government," he went on. "This is too complicated, and, as a result, U.S. policy casts a direct shadow on whatever you do or say. Whether these U.S. policies are good or bad, you cannot escape association with them. I advise you to tell the American people what your government is doing in Viet Nam, with the hope that a change will bring a better plan than the present one. You

must also continue your free dialogue with the young people of Viet Nam. If you leave, you will leave unfinished the beginnings made by your predecessors. If you stay, you will suffer this political identification, but you can continue your tradition of contribution."

Any volunteers who were surprised by the remarks attributing political significance to their economic assistance were soothed when another board member got up and noted that Americans in general were having surprisingly little effect on Vietnamese culture. He seemed pleased, in fact, when he could recite various examples of how his people, in spite of the massive foreign influx, could hold on to so many of their own ways. "We have our own way of thinking, our own logic," he said. "You may try hard, but Asia will remain a mystery." He smiled, then continued. "You and we look at Viet Nam in different ways. You see it through two sets of eyes, Saigon's and Washington's. We Vietnamese hold only one view: Viet Nam's. We sometimes wonder why you Americans like to come to Viet Nam, anyway. Can you conceive of foreign nations sending advisers to your country? We Vietnamese are sensitive about maintaining our national identity. When you try to assist us, it is important to remember that we value your friendliness over your advice. The way you act is very important." The board member had finished speaking, but some of us were not sure what he had really meant to say. He seemed troubled, as if purposely avoiding the key conclusion he had meant to draw. Finally someone asked him point-blank:

"In view of Vietnamese sensitivities and the critical war situation, can a volunteer still be of real help to the Vietnamese people? And what is the best way to help now?"

The board member stood up again, shaking his head knowingly. This time he was going to respond directly to the question. "You know," he said, "if you really want to help the Vietnamese people, then you must help us find peace."

No longer soothing, his words served to stir the uneasy into action. For several, they tipped the scale and led them to agree with the board member's advice to "go back to America and explain what the war has done to our people. Peace can only be found in America." Many volunteers continued to feel that they could still serve

the Vietnamese people by remaining at their posts. Others of us felt that someone must speak out, that the answer to the refugee problem, for example, was not to distribute more bulgur wheat, but to stop creating refugees; that the only way to succeed in Viet Nam was to minimize the American effort, because the more U.S. troops that came to Viet Nam and the longer they stayed, the more harm they would do both to Vietnamese society and to the very goals the United States wished to pursue.

After numerous postponements by the American Embassy, a meeting of leaders of several similarly troubled voluntary agencies was finally arranged with Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker to discuss these problems. The Ambassador was cordial and correct, but the session produced no satisfaction for us in our concerns. It would not be proper to speak out publicly on these matters, he said. The role of volunteers is to help in economic, not political matters. The refugee problem, he said, was a political matter. Yet, from our experience with refugees, we felt that it was at least as much an economic and social problem, and it was very serious. We felt that we had to speak out, and we decided to write a letter to President Johnson. At the same time, however, we wanted to be fair both to the two governments that supported us and to other IVS volunteers who wished to stay in Viet Nam.

For several weeks in the late summer of 1967, lights burned late in the upstairs office at the IVS headquarters. A small group of the deeply concerned were trying to decide how best to help the Vietnamese in the pursuit of peace. Meanwhile, others of us started drafting a letter to the President. Writing in terms of our own experiences, we said:

We are finding it increasingly difficult to pursue quietly our main objective: helping the people in Vietnam. In assisting one family or individual to make a better living or get a better education, it has become evident that our small successes only blind us to how little or negative the effect is in the face of present realities in Vietnam. Thus, to stay in Vietnam and remain silent is to fail to respond to the first need of the Vietnamese people—peace.*

* The full text of this letter is given in the appendix.

Forty-nine volunteers, spread throughout the country, signed the letter. Four of us determined to resign so that we could speak out freely on what we saw and felt. Fears of a premature leak to the press corps compelled us to send the news to Washington as quickly as possible. We were advised that the correct procedure was to deliver the letter to the Ambassador's office for teletype transmission by the Embassy. The procedure, however, turned out to be more complicated than we had anticipated.

Late in the afternoon of September 19, 1967, we handed the letter to the U.S. Mission Coordinator. After reading it, he asked us to come back two days later to meet with Ambassador Bunker. We explained that we merely wished to transmit the letter as quickly as possible and that we planned to release it to the press before the news leaked out in any other way. A certain feeling of tenseness also contributed to our desire to send off the letter without what seemed to us unnecessary delays. The Mission Coordinator left his office for forty-five minutes while he talked with the Ambassador alone. On returning, he repeated the request to come back two days later, explaining that Ambassador Bunker had to leave to meet someone at the airport. The Mission Coordinator again asked that we reconsider the wisdom of sending the letter, pointing out that it was not ethical to publicly protest American and Vietnamese policy while we were guests in Viet Nam. He added that such irresponsibility would make it impossible for us to get jobs in the Foreign Service. He said that the IVS transportation priorities would be upgraded. (We had complained two weeks earlier about our flight priority being lower than that of a colonel's mistress.) In frustration, we tried to explain that our protest was not about technicalities, but about the massive creation of refugees, the free-strike zones, the defoliation. . . . But he interrupted, saying he did not want to discuss U.S. policy with us, that that was not an IVS concern. We gave him the letter and left in frustration and anger, asking that its contents be forwarded by the teletype to President Johnson. Five hours later, we made the letter public to the *New York Times*. The next morning, Ambassador Bunker agreed to see us. He was cordial, but termed our handling of the resignations and the letter "unethical and discourteous." He showed little interest in discussing the reasons for our actions.

On our return to the United States, we found that members of Congress were concerned and that they wanted to discuss with us the problems of Viet Nam. One of us was asked to testify before the Senate Subcommittee on Refugees. Other Senators and Representatives asked us to talk with them privately or in small groups. In all, we met with more than seventy-five members of the Senate and the House. They were concerned about how the United States could get out of Viet Nam in a responsible way and how our government could bring an end to the war and prevent further suffering by the Vietnamese people.

Some Congressmen felt that we should discuss our experiences in Viet Nam with President Johnson. To see the President, it would be necessary to be "checked out" by one of the President's close associates. This was attempted through two different channels. One of these failed to work out, as each appointment was canceled at the last moment. The second channel did lead to an interview with a very high White House aide. After the interview, however, it was made clear that to discuss the widespread resentment against the Saigon government, the growing anti-American feelings in Viet Nam, the effects of defoliants on the crops of Vietnamese farmers, and the problems caused by the creation of refugees would be wasting the President's time. The President's adviser was interested in providing the President with information that would support present administration thinking.

There were also some who thought we should meet with Vice-President Humphrey. Mr. Humphrey had been an enthusiastic supporter of IVS and had visited us in Saigon in 1966. In fact, it was at the animal husbandry station next to our headquarters that he had given his Minnesota hog-call, delighting both his entourage and the press. But now the Vice-President seemed to be unreceptive to our views. We learned that he had called our resignations "one of the greatest disservices to the American effort in Viet Nam." Two U.S. government officials, to whom he had made the remark, disagreed. They felt that discussing the issues openly could be most constructive. Unfortunately, as happened so often, they felt it would not be wise to say this to the Vice-President directly.

On the State Department side, one young officer felt that we

should meet with some of the higher officials there. Appointments were made, and we arrived at his office at the specified time. Embarrassed, he explained that one man we were to see had been summoned to a meeting, and the other was "busy writing a report." He gave us some magazines to read and went off to find someone else who would listen. After two hours, however, he admitted defeat.

Several days later, after Senator Edward Kennedy chided a high official for his reluctance to hear us out, we had more success in getting to see State Department officials. Yet we could not suppress our feelings of frustration as the experiences we cited seemed to make little impression. Policy had gained a momentum of its own, and conflicting views had to be strongly countered. Secretary of State Dean Rusk, for example, felt obliged to say that our statements reflected the opinions of only a small minority of Vietnamese, that the vast majority were all for continuing the military effort. Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy expressed the view that those of us who had resigned from IVS could not see the Viet Nam issue in its proper perspective. But, privately, the fact that volunteers so close to the Vietnamese and so close to the implementation of American policy had spoken out in despair could not help but disturb officials at many levels. Lower echelon officers, if they were willing to speak out at all, admitted sympathy with our position and said they too had been ignored higher up. Even Navy counterinsurgency instructors in California, who had used the "IVS approach" as a model for social and economic development, were asking whether anything could now succeed in Viet Nam.

The most appreciative reaction came from the Vietnamese themselves. Before we had left Saigon, friends who had somehow drifted away came back to see us. "Now we know that there are Americans who are really concerned about us as people, not just as political chessmen," said one. "You have said what we have wanted to say, yet would be put in jail for saying," confided another. A Vietnamese secretary working for the American Aid Mission had read the letter and said wistfully, "I wish I could sign." A Vietnamese teacher in the Mekong Delta told his IVS coworker, "Now we know you aren't with the CIA." A group of taxi drivers in Saigon, who had read about the resignations in the local newspapers, invited

us to a meeting to convey what they felt should be told to the American people on our return. An old friend applauded our decision, but said a regretful farewell: "The problem is, the people we want to have stay, leave; and the people we want to have leave, stay." But perhaps the most eloquent testimony to the problems at hand was written later by a Vietnamese friend who had just begun studies in the United States:

I think that your actions will have an influence on both American youth and Vietnamese youth, and that your actions will create a deep feeling of love and trust among the Vietnamese youth. . . . The right place to find out a solution for Viet Nam is not in Saigon, . . . neither in American officials there, nor in the Vietnamese authority there. *It is here, in America*, with the awakening of a deep, true love for human beings, a realistic view of the world relationship today, in the mind of the American people and the American government. Only by that awakening and realization can the U.S. gain back love, confidence, and friendship with the Vietnamese people and the world. And you can only do that here, in America.

This, then, is our purpose: to tell the story of Viet Nam to our fellow Americans.

[2]

“WHAT A PITY FOR A CAMELLIA FLOWER!”

Vietnamese Society over the Years

For many Vietnamese, the imperial city of Hue is the symbol of their past, the repository of their great traditions and culture. It is not an ancient city, but its very name conjures images of poetic vistas, gracious palaces, fragrant blossoms, and timeless remnants of a glorious history. Standing atop the Emperor's Ngo Mon Gate, one can see the mighty Citadel walls, the winding lotus-covered moat, and the Throne Room and its wide courtyard balanced by two ponds and surrounded by frangipani. Beyond these walls, and several miles up the stately Perfume River, elaborate royal tombs of the Nguyen dynasty trace the story of this earlier Viet Nam: Gia Long, Minh Mang, Thieu Tri, Tu Duc, Dong Khanh, and Khai Dinh are buried here. Bao Dai, the last of the line, is still living—on the French Riviera. It was the Emperor Gia Long, founder of the dynasty, who began construction of the Imperial Palace in Hue on the propitious ninth day of May, 1804. Many of the buildings have since been destroyed in the intervening years of war and revolution, the most recent damage being incurred during the Tet (New Year's) holidays in 1968. But physical destruction cannot extinguish the spiritual light radiating from Hue throughout the land. Hue's history is too profoundly enshrined in the minds of the people, its charm and romantic grace too deeply loved in their hearts.

Barely three miles upriver from the Imperial City is Linh Mu pagoda, a quiet, blissful spot dominated by a seven-tiered tower. Linh Mu has served as the seat of the head Buddhist monk for all of Central Viet Nam. On a veranda, enclosed in glass, is a gilded statue

of the "laughing Buddha" who represents happiness and prosperity. When the Venerable Don Hau was head monk, he would point to this statue and smile, because it looked very much like him. Linh Mu pagoda is not the most beautiful of Hue's many treasure spots, but it is the most historic. Legend has it that an elderly goddess appeared there and chose it as the site for the capital city of the Vietnamese people. The pagoda was constructed in her honor by Nguyen Hoang, the governor of Thuan Hoa, in 1601.

Việt Nam's history reads like a catalogue of expansionary wars, of internal revolts and subsequent efforts at reunification, and of foreign intrusions and withdrawals. For these same Vietnamese who were to suffer at the hands of Chinese and French colonialists had themselves expanded from a small group called the Viets, located in the southern China border regions, into a vigorous and aggressive nation. According to legend, it was the union of a dragon and a goddess that gave birth to the first hundred ancestors of all Vietnamese. They would grow and expand southward, though not yet as far as the present site of Hue. Their new land became known as the Kingdom of Nam Viet, "nam" meaning "south." In 111 B.C., however, foreign intervention compromised the new territory, and the people of Nam Viet were conquered by the Chinese, who later renamed the country An Nam—the pacified south.

The Chinese controlled the land almost continuously for the next thousand years, demanding tribute from the vassal Vietnamese. It was during this time that elements of Chinese civilization and culture came to permeate Vietnamese society, a heritage for which many Vietnamese are still profoundly grateful. But where the Vietnamese were receptive to new forms of culture and technology, they were not receptive to Chinese political domination. Even against overwhelming odds, they rebelled. The names of heroes and heroines of this long period are not forgotten even today, lending themselves to epic poems, to national holidays, and to city streets. The most prominent of these heroic figures, perhaps, are the Hai Ba Trung, the two Trung sisters who in A.D. 40 mounted elephants and led 80,000 of their compatriots against a Chinese governor and his reign of terror. The Chinese returned in full strength three years later, forcing the Trung sisters to suicide by throwing themselves

into the river. Others continued to fight their cause, however, and the Chinese yoke was finally removed in A.D. 939. Periodically, to be sure, the Chinese tried to subjugate the Vietnamese again. Le Loi led the Vietnamese in a counterattack in the fifteenth century, and Nguyen Hue later surprised carousing Chinese soldiers with a New Year's attack on occupied Hanoi. These struggles against Chinese oppressors have never been forgotten by the history-conscious Vietnamese.

The Chinese have not been the only ones to arouse Vietnamese nationalism. Three times in the thirteenth century, the Mongol hordes of Kublai Khan were repelled by numerically inferior Vietnamese forces, on the last occasion largely through Marshal Tran Hung Dao's guerrilla warfare tactics.

Beginning in the fourteenth century, and with their northern borders relatively secure, the Vietnamese again turned their attention southward. They conquered the once-great kingdom of Champa that occupied much of what is now Central Viet Nam, and then proceeded into the Mekong River Delta and fought the Khmers, now called Cambodians. Oddly enough, the fertile Mekong Delta was sparsely populated until Vietnamese pioneers moved south in families or by entire villages to settle it. Now the delta is heavily populated, and the sole reminder of these colonial years are a few hundred thousand Cambodians still living there. Along the central coast, most Chams have entered the larger society, and only a handful remain unassimilated, continuing to eke out a living in the shadow of crumbling Cham towers.

It was during this period of expansion that Vietnamese civilization, under the fifteenth-century Le dynasty, attained a remarkable brilliance and sophistication: an elaborate legal code, a complex religion, a hierarchical civil service system, and flourishing arts and commerce. All this, however, did not lead to political unity. With fewer dangers threatening from outside, the Vietnamese soon took to fighting among themselves. By the early seventeenth century, North and South were effectively divided between two powerful ruling families, the Trinh and the Nguyen. For almost two centuries this internal division and struggling continued, and no attempt at reunification succeeded until that of the Emperor Gia Long, who

founded his throne at Hue in 1802. It was Gia Long who for the first time ruled over a single Viet Nam extending from the Chinese border in the north to the Ca Mau Peninsula in the south.

But unification, though it would last more or less until the Geneva Accords of 1954, hardly brought an end to problems. From the West new intruders had been showing themselves, first in the interests of commerce and converts, but later in demand of territory. One of the first was the French Father Alexandre de Rhodes, who in the seventeenth century developed the "Quoc-ngu," the Romanized alphabet which ultimately replaced the traditional Chinese characters in the written Vietnamese language. Other early arrivals brought arms and were well received by various Vietnamese factions that wished to strengthen their hand against competitors. In later years, however, the Court at Hue took a dimmer view of the foreigners and decried "the perverse religion of the European." In the nineteenth century, fearing erosion of their national traditions, the intensely nationalistic Vietnamese took revenge by murdering some 100,000 of their fellow countrymen who had been converted to Catholicism. It was a complex combination of these affronts to French efforts and the need to compete economically with the other European colonial powers that led to the actual French takeover of all Indochina, beginning with the forced cession of three eastern Cochinchinese provinces in 1862.

Like the Chinese, the French contributed much to Viet Nam, both culturally and physically. They built or improved much of the infrastructure for future economic development, such as roads and railroads, canals and dikes, not to mention schools, hospitals, scientific institutions, and the elegant buildings of the larger cities and towns. It is true that the French did all this with a view to their own profit, extracted chiefly from the rubber plantations and through commerce, but some gains could be felt by the Vietnamese too. Nevertheless, it is rare for a colonized people to feel gratitude toward their colonial masters. Receptivity to cultural and technological contributions, yes; to political control and personal subjugation, absolutely not. Again, the names of city streets recall the heroes of resistance: such names as Phan Dinh Phung and Phan Boi Chau. The name of another such hero may not be uttered on the

streets of South Viet Nam, and its use is discouraged in the North because of the man's humility. That man is Ho Chi Minh.

When independence had been won from the French, but while disunity was rife in the South, frustrated Vietnamese often attributed all their problems to the period of French domination: The French, they asserted, used divide-and-rule tactics in order to weaken Viet Nam. That was why the people found it so hard to unite against the Communists. There was some truth to this accusation, but in all objectivity it would have to be admitted that the Vietnamese have been a divided people throughout most of their history. "Their favorite national pastime," wrote Bernard Fall, seemed to be "bitter quarrels among themselves . . . , and between Northerners and Southerners in particular." This is a sad commentary, and no one is more exasperated by its truth than the Vietnamese. To them, history seems to have taught three things: one is this sense of frustration over disunity; another is the belief that they have been singled out for special suffering in this world; and the third and by far most important is the feeling that, in spite of everything, the Vietnamese people *will* overcome adversity.

"Now my country has changed so very much," a friend wrote to us after the 1968 attack on Hue. "Many buildings, houses, schools, hospitals, are in rubble, in ashes, in ruins. Now I think that the Vietnamese people are the unhappiest people in the world. We have endured this war for so long. Yet, I keep working. We must keep working to help our suffering compatriots and to rebuild our Viet Nam."

Just as the Vietnamese share a common history, replete with divisions though it may be, so do they also share a common culture. To be sure, they have adopted much from the cultures of their conquerors, particularly from the Chinese. Yet, even the Vietnamese who proudly cites his debts to the great power to the north will stoutly maintain his own awareness of what it means to be *Vietnamese*. Thus, while the basis of social organization in both cultures is the family, and while the patriarchal Confucian ethic is central to both, the Vietnamese differ from their former mentors in that in Viet Nam women enjoy considerable authority. Vietnamese religion

also tends to be more eclectic than Chinese, consisting as it does of a combination of Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism (with its cosmological outlook and animism), and in some cases Christianity. Some of the characteristics which distinguish Vietnamese culture can be explained by history. Some scholars, for example, believe that the relative authority of women in Vietnamese society entered the culture through contacts with the matriarchal Chams. Certain religious influences, particularly Theravada Buddhism, have entered Vietnamese society in a similar way, for what later became South Viet Nam was a traditional crossroads of commerce and religious proselytizing between China and India. It is because of this geographic location between the Indian subcontinent and the expanses of China, and the fusion of cultures transmitted by merchants and monks traveling in both directions, that the area became the melting pot eventually known as Indochina. The Vietnamese have generally remained quite open to adopting what they consider the best traits of other cultures. Still, because of the special and long history of involvement with the Chinese, Viet Nam is the only country in Southeast Asia to be influenced by China far more than by India.

The foundation of Vietnamese society, as of Chinese, is the family. This fact is widely cited in the textbooks and is recognized by most Americans. Yet its importance and significance are usually underestimated. Family ties explain many social phenomena in Viet Nam. One of these is bureaucratic corruption (see Chapter 5). Another is the apparent immorality of that whole sector of society turned topsy-turvy, of young girls and women who all too readily become prostitutes, of children who become beggars or thieves. Family ties help explain why the creation of refugees is likely to convert these people into Viet Cong (see Chapter 8), and why government administrators or soldiers sometimes seem unconcerned about "the war effort." Many of the everyday habits of Vietnamese, which sometimes lead Americans to shake their heads in wonder or even anger, are explained by an understanding of Vietnamese family ties.

The devotion of a Vietnamese to his family is practically unlimited, and the sentiment he feels toward his father is one of near reverence. This devotion toward a paterfamilias is, of course, the

essence of Confucian doctrine, and it is extended in a religious sense to what amounts to ancestor worship. In every home is a family altar where sticks of incense are lit on family anniversaries and holidays, and where offerings are made and prayers are said in memory of those who have passed away. The deceased cannot be forgotten, for their spirits are believed to affect the daily lives of their descendants. It is true that modernization and Western influences in the cities, and to some extent the rigors of war, have diluted the ritualistic elements of this worship, but the customary family ties remain strong among even the most westernized of the elite.

As Americans, we were constantly confronted by manifestations of these strong family ties. Vietnamese children, for example, refer to their fathers as "serious," or "worthy," or "hard-working." They see their fathers as persons from whom they must gain permission to complete their education or to do this or that, not as an assumed source of material gifts. Many express their concern over their father's unhappiness or ill health, and very few ever express negative feelings toward their parents, even in momentary fits of anger. Vietnamese children are generally oriented toward family expectations, rather than toward their rights and duties vis-à-vis the society as a whole. Their main concern is to fulfill their role as a member of the family. There are reasons for this general outlook. Most Vietnamese children are aware that their parents have had difficult lives, and they feel that they have contributed to some extent to their burden. Having incurred a debt, they feel that they owe something in return. Their parents have given them life and shared their usually modest resources. The child's duty as he gets older, then, is to accept responsibility for his parents. This is the Vietnamese system of both social security and social organization. By extension, it calls for revering the parents of one's parents, or one's ancestors, and for assuming responsibility for the ancestral altars and tombs. Because of these tombs, the same piety that characterizes the relations of a Vietnamese to his family also characterizes his attachment to the ancestral lands. To be forced off these lands by war is a deeply upsetting experience. For, seen in the larger perspective, the rhythm of everyday life assumes a kind of deeply ingrained religious significance.

These cultural traditions explain why Miss Thuy, a government civil servant, sends a part of her earnings every month to her father—even though her father is a wealthy man and doesn't need it. Other civil servants, seemingly derelict in their duties because they have taken extended holidays to visit their families, may feel that they are fulfilling responsibilities more important than those of the civil service. When we bravely told our Vietnamese friends that we did not miss our families, that we were not homesick, they had great difficulty in believing us. It seemed most unnatural to them. The closeness of the family also explains why Vietnamese seem to have so many brothers and sisters. It takes a patient Vietnamese-speaking American to determine who is really a brother or sister and who is a cousin.

On the other hand, Vietnamese couples do have numerous children. Even though they are, by Western standards, too poor for this, they have very compelling reasons for accumulating large families. One is this very element of social security—a large family insures that parents will be well cared for in their old age. Another is the advantage in terms of enhancing the family name and reputation. Every family must also be assured of at least one male offspring who can carry on the ancestor cult and maintain the tombs. There are more directly pragmatic reasons, too: large families mean more helpers around the house or farm. Finally, because the death rate has always been high, earlier because of poor health facilities and now because of the war, parents feel they must, in a sense, "overcompensate" in their family planning.

Sometimes there seems almost to be a competition among Vietnamese men to see who has produced the largest number of children. One deputy province chief bemoaned the fact that he had only eight children, whereas his boss, the province chief, had twelve. "Why don't you just go ahead and have four more?" we suggested in a half-joking attempt to cheer him up. "That's all very well," the deputy chief replied sadly, "but by that time the province chief will have twenty." Flippant remarks touching on family ties were harshly received by Vietnamese colleagues, no matter how jokingly intended. One such quip earned an American volunteer a lasting lesson. "Well, Mr. Thong, if you have so many children that you

can't take care of them all," he had said, smiling, "why don't you just get rid of one or two?" "That shows how much you know about Vietnamese society," Mr. Thong replied. "No matter how desperate we are, we could never break up the family." At other times, Vietnamese friends or acquaintances seemed to complain about the difficulties of raising such large families. Women sometimes urged us to adopt their children, though they did this only when they seemed assured the offspring would be treated well and given more advantages than they could otherwise receive.

The Vietnamese government also made mistakes in its judgments of family life. During the regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem, the infamous Madame Nhu, Diem's sister-in-law, took it upon herself to redraft the family legal code. Divorce was outlawed and men were limited to one wife. Although her intention was to stabilize and strengthen family life by this law, the result was upsetting and she was accused of extending Catholic morality into a predominantly Confucian-Buddhist culture. Divorce or having "second wives" may be an important way out for Vietnamese who find themselves in a marital situation that, for physical reasons, cannot be consummated with natural offspring. And offspring are vital for continuation of the family line and for upkeep of the ancestral tombs. "Of the three crimes of filial impiety," said the Chinese philosopher Mencius many centuries ago, "the fact of not having children is the greatest." A Saigon newspaper of the day published a letter to the editor asking how the dilemma posed by Madame Nhu's action might be resolved: "Are we to disobey our whole tradition and religious codes, or are we to obey the government's new law?" The newspaper, naturally under government control, published an interesting reply: "The concept of filial piety has changed, whether one likes it or not. If by some misfortune you are unable to perpetuate your line, your ancestors will pardon you. But if you disobey the government Family Code, surely your ancestors cannot be content."

In a way, it is surprising that the ravages of war have not affected Vietnamese society more than they have. On the surface, and judging from conversations with individual Vietnamese, the war seems to have left practically no facet of life untouched or unmarred. Yet,

the pillars of Vietnamese cultural values persist, their strength proved further by the awful stresses. American visitors are sometimes repelled by certain practices that they take to be natural to the Vietnamese people. Corruption is one such practice, and though it should not be condoned, it is, to a large extent, one method by which individuals adjust to the uncertainties of economic life in a war-torn country. Another mutation in the society is the fantastic proliferation of prostitution, of the "bar society," and of the other nefarious activities which seem to glut and degrade the once fashionable city streets or areas surrounding foreign military camps. Prostitution is hardly new to the world, and if its rampant presence seems to cheapen the country in which it thrives, the motivations behind it must be understood. If one asks a bar-girl or prostitute why she entered her profession, the answer is frequently, "To help my family," or "To aid my parents in old age," or "To send my little brothers and sisters to school." Theirs is a pathetic story, because the way they have chosen is not always the most desirable for them. If their American military clients could speak with them in Vietnamese and know the extent of their suffering, and at the same time the frequent nobility of the desire to help their families, they would undoubtedly see their bedroom mates in a different light. Not all pursue their professions with such altruistic intentions, of course, but the fact is that many do.

Parents do not necessarily look down on their daughters' efforts to help the family in this way. They wish there were better ways, perhaps, but surely none is so profitable. There is a certain desperation in the whole thing, and among some a deep cynicism. One young schoolteacher friend announced that his wife was expecting their first baby. "Congratulations," we said, adding our hope that it would be a boy, for a boy is generally a desirable first offspring for the traditional reason of wanting to perpetuate the family name. "Oh no," he replied, only half-jokingly. "I hope it will be a girl; then she can help the family by working in a bar and making lots of money."

Giving oneself up to prostitution in order to help one's own family is a sacrifice exalted in Vietnamese literature. The noble and beautiful heroine of the nineteenth-century *Kim Van Kieu*, Viet

Nam's greatest literary masterpiece, sold herself in order to earn enough money to help her father and brother survive difficult circumstances. "What a pity for a camellia flower!" moaned the poet, Nguyen Du. But the heroine, Thuy Kieu, saw in her deed the nobility of aiding her family. "It is better that I should sacrifice myself alone," she said. "It matters little if a flower falls if the tree can keep its leaves green."

It is difficult with the Vietnamese, as it is perhaps with any people, to differentiate between their way of life, their social values, and their religion. The family as the pillar of society represents all three, embodying the Confucian ethic as an underlying characteristic common to all people. Another such common characteristic is the broad Vietnamese cosmology. Based in part on Taoist ideas, it comprises belief in spirits, in astrology, and in a "Mandate of Heaven." Many "modern" Vietnamese, of course, do not share all aspects of this cosmology, and even more will deny sharing it. Nevertheless, such beliefs are widespread, particularly in the rural areas. The Mandate of Heaven, for example, determines the worthiness of an emperor or other governing power by his ability to mediate between Heaven and people on earth. In the late 1950's, Ngo Dinh Diem was thought to enjoy this Mandate of Heaven, his authority being largely acknowledged and opposition being limited. In the early 1960's, however, as dissension increased, and as he seemed to be misusing his power, he lost the Mandate. The people and Heaven frowned upon him, and he ultimately fell. No subsequent government, the Vietnamese believe, has earned the Mandate of Heaven, and that is why South Viet Nam is so out of kilter with the heavens.

There are many examples of the influences of astrology on Vietnamese life. On a higher level, the new Vietnamese constitution was made to center around the lucky number nine. Written by 117 deputies, it was composed of 117 articles, included a 117-word preamble, and was issued on April 1, 1967 (4-1-67). In each case the sum of the component digits (of 117 or 18) was nine. On the everyday level, wedding dates are always chosen in consultation with an astrologer, and we knew a provincial education-service

chief who determined the rare days on which he would visit village schools by consulting his astrologer's calendar. Province-wide teachers' meetings were scheduled for auspicious days, too. "You would do well to abide by the signs yourself," he cautioned us. "Just because you come from a technological society does not mean you know everything about life and the ways of the universe."

On a still lower level, this cosmology is represented by spirits or goddesses such as the one who in late 1963 took up residence on the top of the highest mountain in the area around Dalat. The popular name of the mountain is Nui Ba, the Woman Mountain, so-called because of its double peaks which resemble a woman's breasts. For weeks, throngs of Vietnamese of all ranks climbed to the main summit of Nui Ba, which rises to an altitude of more than 6,000 feet and requires a full day for the round trip. In a flat clearing just before the last steep climb, they stuck thousands of incense sticks into the moss of the forest trees and set up makeshift altars there. At the summit itself, the pilgrims filled their containers with holy water which they believed the goddess had left there, and then they descended. We met a sophisticated-looking midwife who had just made the climb and asked her about it. "It's all true," she replied. "The holy water cures all kinds of sickness. My cousin saw himself how the blind and the mute were cured. Everyone who takes the goddess' water is cured by it."

Related to the cosmological hierarchy is the social hierarchy of man. There are four levels to the Vietnamese social order: first there are the *si*, the scholars or men of letters; next come the *nong*, the farmers; third are the *cong*, or workers; and fourth are the *thuong*, the businessmen and merchants. Occasionally a fifth is added: the *binh*, or soldiers, whose position is somewhat ambiguous. For although they are considered a rather lowly breed, many, and particularly those who led troops against foreign invaders, have become heroes to the people. Vietnamese history honors most the men of letters, and the kings who doubled as poets are especially revered. The entire mandarin system—which formed the basis of traditional civil service—paid honor to the fruits of learning, for to be appointed a mandarin one had to pass stringent qualifying examinations.

Now, however, all this has changed, and even been reversed. Now government is by the military in cooperation with businessmen—that is, by those who profit most from the war and from corruption. Its leaders are young in a culture that still associates wisdom with age. High on the ladder of wealth today are the prostitutes and bar-girls, and more generally the whole segment of society that serves the foreigners. In traditional terms the foreigners, too, are lowly soldiers. “*Nhat di, nhi tuong*,” goes the new Vietnamese expression—first the prostitutes, second the generals. To the cynical, this represents the current hierarchy. The scholars and intellectuals, respected in years past, are now alienated, forgotten men, and it is the farmers and workers who suffer most from the direct effects of the war. It will be of great interest to see how the Vietnamese social order will sort itself out after the war is over, to see whether it will reinstitute its traditional levels or whether a new hierarchy will evolve.

Although events have thrown the social order into disarray, some of the underlying assumptions remain. Chief among these is the value attached to education, the traditional vehicle for social mobility and stature in the Confucian order. Parents, who quite naturally desire the best opportunities for their children, work hard in order to send their offspring to the best schools available. One of the more gratifying sights for us was of the supremely proud faces of bearded old village notables attending the inauguration of a school in whose establishment we had played some part. And on the rough plank walls of an unimposing barbershop on the outskirts of Saigon, our barber had taken the pains to hang only one small picture—that of his children’s school.

It was in response to the high Vietnamese regard for education that IVS first established an English-teaching team in 1962. Previously only agriculturalists had been sent, but they found themselves constantly begged by the people in their communities to teach them English. We teachers were sometimes embarrassed, however, to note that in spite of our youth and just-out-of-college appearance, we were exalted by Vietnamese as “*Ong Thay*”—Mr. Teacher. Vietnamese students are particularly respectful toward their teach-

ers, and the youngest often take off their hats and bow as "Ong Thay" goes past. Outside the high schools, in our extra evening classes for friends and colleagues in the community, being a teacher could occasionally even compromise our desire to be "one of the gang" with those near our own ages. "I'm sorry," said one friend and former student, "but we must remain on a relatively formal footing together. After all, I still consider you as my teacher."

There are never enough public-school facilities in Viet Nam to handle the masses of children to be educated. The drafting of large numbers of teachers into the army has aggravated a situation in which each class already averaged sixty pupils. A tough examination system still exists in order to scale down the number of pupils to something approximating the number of openings available. Education is thus competitive, and cases of bribing officials among those who have the means, or of suicide among those who do not pass, are not uncommon. For those who do not succeed academically—and this applies from primary school all the way up the line—there is the thriving private-school business. Although not as good, generally speaking, as the public schools, private schools are in such demand in urban areas that there may be one on every block. They are often very profitable too, since no parent would skimp on his child's education.

Students of all ages enjoy a deference unknown to their American counterparts, though not unlike that known in Europe. It is not surprising, therefore, that their influence on national politics has been considerably greater than in the United States. To the Vietnamese, they are still the privileged and the leadership class. This position does not always serve them to advantage, however, especially in this modern revolutionary age when demands are being made to narrow the gap between rural and urban populations. Here the *nature* of their education is the critical factor. Vietnamese sometimes point out that traditional education under the mandarin system was eminently suited to those who would govern the rural Viet Nam of the past. With the combination of a new French viceroy and a society in revolution, the setting has changed. The educated still enjoy great prestige, but the educational content, they say, is now

outdated. The mark of the educated man is no longer a mere talent to recite poetry. It is rather the ability to solve problems of economic development and to cope with modern technology.

Throughout their history, we have seen, the Vietnamese have united together most effectively when called upon to throw out invaders on their soil. For the Vietnamese are bound together as one people and one enveloping culture. Each person has his own niche in the greater whole. North, Center, and South, they share traditions and beliefs in common: a Confucian social perspective, with its cult of ancestors and respect for family and education; and a particular view of life and the universe, with its sometime belief in spirits and astrology. Of course, organized religion is important too, and we shall later note the impact of Buddhism and Catholicism (see Chapter 6).

But Buddhism and Catholicism, as well as the newer religions of Hoa Hao and Cao Dai, have also proved divisive during certain periods of Vietnamese history. For all their shared attributes of culture, the Vietnamese have been plagued, as their history shows, by several serious impediments to national unity. Probably the greatest of these is the fact of regional differences and regional loyalties among Vietnamese.

To some one million northerners who came south after the 1954 Geneva Accords, life in the new land seemed different and in some respects alien. One of our students, a young lady, described it well in a composition exercise:

For me, no place on this earth is more attractive, more pleasant than my native country. My country is not only an interesting place to live in, but it is also a friend, a dear and close one who shares joys and sorrows. I have there all my relatives to whom I am bound by affection. My beloved ancestors slept their eternal sleep under the ground. My country keeps so many childish memories. Never shall I forget those winter evenings when I joked with my friends or those summer nights under a smiling moon and myriad twinkling stars.

This mental treasure increases year after year and cements slowly but solidly this eternal attachment between me and my ascendants.

In 1954, Saigon was for me the prosperous, luxurious, and fairest city

of Viet-Nam, but I never imagined that one day I could land in it.

According to the settlement of Geneva (July 20, 1954) Northern people in Viet-Nam had two choices: stay in the North or go settling in the South. All families were perplexed and hardly knew how to decide, to act. There was separation in all of them because some of the members intended to stay, regretting to leave their property, their souvenirs; the others who were afraid of V.C., to go away.

My family was in that general situation. On one side, I wanted to stay with my parents and on the other I was afraid that the V.C. would oblige all the rest of the Hanoi girls to get married with their invalid militaries or send us to a "Correction Camp." . . . My parents missed me very much but they didn't want to see me unhappy, so they let me choose the way.

I remember that I took a long time to make up my mind, so I left Hanoi on the 4th of October, the last day in a last plane of Air Viet-Nam and the last ticket, too.

As the day of departure approached I got more and more excited. Some days I intended to rear up the ticket and stay home. At last the day arrived: my parents, sisters, brother, friends and relatives went to the Air Viet-Nam agency to see me off. . . . When the plane flew off, I felt so lonely and upset. . . . I was too tired from so many great emotions, exciting experiences and because of the airsickness and the altitude which made me dizzy. . . .

Now I am happy in the South of Viet-Nam, but though Hanoi is out of sight, it is never out of mind.

It is true that Vietnamese from the North are different from those of the South. The differences go beyond sheer sentimentality and the inevitable feeling any Vietnamese has for his own "que huong," his homeland. They involve more than varying food preferences and language peculiarities. There are, indeed, marked character differences between northerners and southerners. For example, people from the North are often more high strung and active than the relaxed people of the relatively new lands in the South. Somehow the hardest workers and the most progressive innovators seem to be the ones who came from the North after the Geneva Accords. Even their accent reflects this trait to some extent: the speech of northerners has a staccato quality that contrasts sharply with the soft slurring tones of the southerners. There are reasons for these

character differences, which many of the more candid Vietnamese will discuss.

The simplest reason is that those who left the North were, relatively speaking, the most progressive ones, those who had accumulated some wealth already which they feared would be lost to the Communist regime there, and those who had the courage to pull up their roots and start again elsewhere. But aside from this, the climate in North Viet Nam's Red River Delta is very hard. The winters are cold. Flood years alternate with drought years, and the farmer must match his wits against nature. Dikes must be built to regulate the water, and making a living is arduous and challenging. The climate, in a sense, hones the body and mind to their sharpest. By contrast, the Mekong River Delta of the South is always warm and rarely floods. There are no years of real drought and the farmer's life is comparatively easy. The soil is fertile, and the rice grows well with a minimum of emergency precautions. And so, the explanation concludes, the northerner is more alert and more aggressive than the relaxed and fun-loving southerner.

The geography of Viet Nam is often represented by a woman balancing a bamboo yoke on her right shoulder, on either end of which is suspended a basket for carrying rice. The rice baskets represent the two deltas of the North and South, the regions called Tonkin and Cochinchina by the French. The pole in between is the narrow coastal strip of An Nam, or, as the Vietnamese call it, Central Viet Nam. Half of this area is now administered by the government in Hanoi, but the Saigon government was able to hold onto the old capital of Hue. The people of Central Viet Nam have their own customs, traditions, dialect, and foods, which differ again from those of both the South and the North. Central Vietnamese invariably point out that all the greatest national leaders, of both South and North, were born or at least educated in the Center: Ngo Dinh Diem, Ho Chi Minh, Pham Van Dong, and Vo Nguyen Giap, for example, all attended the same high school, Quoc Hoc, in Hue. (We would remind IVS English teachers, frustrated over their classroom discipline problems at Quoc Hoc, of the prestigious background of their school. But even though the school still attracts talented boys,

it must be hard for the teachers to visualize *their* students achieving such fame.)

Political activists in Viet Nam still tend to be Central Vietnamese. It is no coincidence that every antigovernment movement from 1963 to the present, for example, originated in Hue before spreading to Saigon. Hue's own calm and stately appearance hides the political machinations going on under the surface. Why are people from Central Viet Nam likely to be more politically interested than those elsewhere? Vietnamese from there believe that their political involvement is a function of the poverty of the region. It is true that the land is probably the poorest in the country, and the people are crowded onto a thin strip between the mountains and the South China Sea. But no one could explain very precisely whether poverty drove people to seek improvement through politics, or whether natural politicians simply made more progress among a have-not population looking for something better. In the case of Hue itself, the influence of the imperial past certainly has something to do with her people's political consciousness. Although recent years have seen considerable mobility of the population, Hue is still full of names that indicate varying degrees of direct descendancy from the royal family. The Queen Mother still lives in Hue, and so do various nieces and nephews of Emperor Bao Dai. Among the other oldest and most respected families, each member knows from exactly which emperor he is descended. Those bearing the name Buu or Vinh are among the most closely related to royalty, and they point to it with understandable pride. It may or may not be coincidence that of the two top Buddhist student leaders in the 1964-1966 period, the family name of one was Buu and that of the other was Vinh.

The different characteristics and even mentalities of North, Central, and South Vietnamese go far toward explaining their suspicions of one another. To the other two, the northerner often seems aggressive and power-hungry, the southerner lazy and uncommitted, and the Central Vietnamese haughty and provincial. This by no means implies any rigidity of conception, for the feeling of being Vietnamese still overshadows these regional rivalries; but in weak

moments, jealousies flare up and cabinet crises ensue, club memberships are limited, and revolts may even break out, with each group fully believing that "the others do not understand us."

Understanding, in fact, is the key to the whole matter. It is important not only in terms of regional differences between individuals, but also in terms of the outlook of the Vietnamese government toward its people. It has been partly through failures in understanding that governments have been unresponsive, leading to dissatisfaction among the population. For the Vietnamese, life itself has changed too abruptly in recent years. The affairs of earth have been thrown out of harmony with the heavens. A new equilibrium is needed, and the Mandate of Heaven must be restored to a worthy ruler. Only then can the descendants of the early Viets live in peace and stability.

[3]

REPRESENTING THE PEOPLE

Saigon Politics

The boom of a cannon reverberated in the early morning air, rattling windows on the broad Thong Nhat Boulevard in downtown Saigon. It was October 26, 1963, the eighth anniversary of President Ngo Dinh Diem's Republic of South Viet Nam. But the bleachers along the boulevard were barely a third full for the National Day ceremonies. Although most of Saigon's elite class had been invited, many of them had anticipated trouble and were afraid to attend. As for the common people of the city, barbed wire strung for blocks around kept them from approaching the parade route.

All passes had been carefully checked, but the security police were jumpy and we had the feeling that spies, counterspies, and counter-counterspies were planted everywhere. The cannon continued to boom. We wondered whether the long-expected *coup d'état* might not be under way.

As it turned out, however, the cannon was only saluting President Diem as he departed from Gia Long Palace (where he had been living since his regular palace was bombed in a coup attempt in 1962) on his way to the National Day ceremonies. Moments later, preceded by a phalanx of motorcycles and military jeeps with sirens screaming, he appeared: a small, pudgy, pleasant-looking man who waddled from his glistening Mercedes into position to review the colors. Four bands played the national anthem and the special song of praise entitled "Long Live President Ngo." The President then reviewed the troops from another glistening car, this one a convertible, and after that the parade began.

Standing in front of us were two German journalists with a Viet-

namese interpreter. The latter, noting that one of us could understand German, began identifying the various troop units parading in front of us. "Those are Ngo Dinh Nhu's shock troops—the special guard, the ones who raided the Buddhist pagodas a few weeks ago. And there are Madame Nhu's women's solidarity troops." They all looked trim and polished as they marched down the boulevard. "There certainly are a lot of troops marching," we noted. "Yes," the interpreter agreed, still speaking German, "and that means that no one is out fighting the Viet Cong. A terrible situation . . ." He proceeded to discuss the faults of the Diem regime. An American newsman standing nearby announced that all the weapons carried by the parade participants had been assiduously unloaded before the procession began, so fearful was President Diem of an attempt on his life or his regime. As we acknowledged his remark in English, another man standing in front of us turned his head, obviously listening and straining to catch every word.

"No, don't say anything in English or French or Vietnamese," the interpreter warned in German. "That man is a spy. All the spies are trained in English, French, and of course Vietnamese. But none of them knows German. As long as we speak like this, we're safe. Look how he's struggling to understand us!"

As volunteers, we were affected by all these tensions only indirectly, particularly those of us who were far from Saigon and working in the provinces. Generally speaking, we were more observers than participants in the affairs of the Vietnamese government. While we could seldom avoid a feeling of anguish at seeing the psychological stresses of our Vietnamese colleagues and friends, we were directly affected only when the chaos of internal politics actually touched on our own projects and work. The day after this particular National Day parade, for example, an IVS girl came back from church and reported at the lunch table what she had just seen downtown: government police hosing away the ashes of a Buddhist monk who had burned himself to death in the square. This, of course, was enough to shock everyone. But at other times our natural reactions to momentous political events were so mundane as to seem ridiculous in retrospect.

Six days after the parade, we were driving back home to Dalat

after a full day out in the hamlets. It was a few minutes before six o'clock, and we had gauged our return so that we would barely have time to change clothes before going to teach English at the Vietnamese-American Association. Near the control post on the outskirts of town, however, a long line of cars, buses, and trucks was stopped—apparently as the result of an accident on the road. Swearing to ourselves because the delay would make us late for class, we tried to pass the waiting line. But our Land Rover was soon halted by armed soldiers. We could hear other drivers talking about President Diem being "out." Among them were some Frenchmen on holiday who had spent the afternoon at one of the waterfalls which helped make Dalat so popular with sufficiently wealthy vacationers. They had heard that a *coup d'état* was in progress, and that there was fighting going on in the city. This would not have been surprising, since the effervescent mayor of Dalat was very pro-Diem.

We were still disgruntled at having rushed so, only to miss our class now anyway, but one of the French girls giddily announced that this was her first *coup d'état*. Among the others, jokes were exchanged over the possibility of having to spend the night on the road. "What are you worrying about?" one of the men asked us. "With a revolution in progress, you are hardly very likely to have a class tonight." He was right, of course. When the report of fighting turned out to be untrue and we were allowed to enter the city some forty minutes later, hardly a Vietnamese was in sight on the streets. They were all home listening to the radio play martial music, the broadcast of which later became an automatic signal that a military coup was in progress. Except for some excited soldiers, the only man we saw, in fact, was a lone gas-station attendant (the station was closed) who stood by the Shell pumps as we passed. He saluted briskly and grinned from ear to ear.

The IVS house in Dalat was embarrassingly large and opulent, but in Dalat the villa style was rather common and this one was loaned to us without rent. Of more interest than our house, however, was the villa next door, which was one of Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu's vacation retreats. She rarely stayed there, and when she did it was only long enough to order a change in the construction or *décor*. The roof of the swimming-pool pavilion, for example, underwent

numerous changes of tile, one having just been completed about the time of the coup. That night, however, her house was dark and silent. Her children, who according to rumor were staying there while she was traveling in the United States, had allegedly fled into the forest nearby. We could not help recalling the Christmas before when Madame Nhu herself had come over to our yard for a hot-dog roast with a group of IVS people. But that was before she began talking of the "barbecue shows" of Buddhists. ("I would clap hands at seeing another monk barbecue show," she had said in a letter to the *New York Times*, "for one cannot be responsible for the madness of others." She was referring, of course, to the Buddhist self-immolations.)

At our house, Chi Ba, the cook, was excited, though she wasn't quite sure why, nor did she fully realize what was going on. She did announce, however, that she was glad if something had happened to Madame Nhu, and she repeated some common gossip about Madame Nhu's bedroom life. Bao, an interpreter for AID, was taking the matter more seriously. He had come to our house because he didn't want to spend the night alone. We guessed rightly that the object of his worry was his wife of just three weeks. She was visiting her family in coup-embattled Saigon at the time. The radio news offered little consolation for him, since the martial music was interrupted only occasionally for announcements, most of which merely urged the population to remain calm and to obey the new military rulers.

At the market place next morning, in spite of a light rain, there were unusually large numbers of people milling about. Throngs of soldiers, armed with bayoneted rifles, were preparing for an eleven o'clock public meeting in the central square. As we made our purchases, the saleswomen beamed with happiness over the new events. "Vui lam, vui lam," they kept repeating—"we're very glad, we're very glad." Yet they remained cautious too, for Diem's death had not yet been revealed. Although the radio did not hesitate to denounce him and his family rule, the people in the market were more circumspect. "We don't know," they said when asked about him. But an hour later, at the public meeting, Diem's and Nhu's deaths were announced, and the crowds were exuberant. More cheers greeted the remarks of the confident local military leaders when

they, like Chi Ba, denounced Madame Nhu as a chicken with scratching claws. Vietnamese in the crowd leaned over and spontaneously shared their feelings with Americans they did not know. "President Diem very bad," they said. Then they turned away, jockeying for position in order to see the men making speeches. The applause and exhilaration of the population were overwhelming. Even the bayonet-carrying soldiers could not conceal their smiles as the man who had replaced the once-jolly mayor promised the new government's program: unity against the Viet Cong, freedom of religion and speech, and progress toward a just and more prosperous society.

Actually, President Diem had not always been considered "very bad." In the early years, his success and popularity surprised every observer. When he first came to power, with decisive U.S. government support, opposition to him was ferocious in South Viet Nam. At the time of partition in 1954, it was widely accepted that in a free election in both North and South Viet Nam (with roughly equal populations), Ho Chi Minh would have won 80 per cent of the popular vote against Diem. In 1955, a story made the rounds comparing the position taken by the United States in supporting a South Vietnamese government under Diem with the case of the prisoner condemned to death by a Turkish sultan. The prisoner was given a year's reprieve when he offered to teach the sultan's horse to talk. When his comrades asked him why he had made such an incredible bet, the prisoner said, "Anything can happen in a year. I may die a peaceful death. Or the sultan may die and I will go free. Or, who knows, I may even teach the animal to speak." By 1958 it seemed indeed as if the horse had learned to speak. The army had fallen in behind Ngo Dinh Diem, the gangster bands of the Binh Xuyen were defeated, the armed religious sects of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao were under the control of the government, and most of Diem's political enemies had been effectively suppressed. In addition he had the strong support of the refugees, those who had "voted with their feet" and come south after the Geneva Accords placed North Viet Nam under Communist rule. The American policy of support thus seemed justified.

It was not long, however, before Diem's rule grew too strong and his consolidation of power turned indiscriminate and arbitrary. As with subsequent governments, Diem did not know how to keep control while still permitting responsible dissent. Criticism became heresy and threats (usually called Communists) appeared behind every bush. National elections were rigged to assure massive Diemist majorities in the Saigon Assembly, and we knew at least one opposition candidate who left the country in protest against the regime's vote manipulation and harassment of her campaign. In the summer of 1956, Diem abolished the elected village councils, destroying a traditional form of democracy in Viet Nam, and replaced them with village officers appointed by the province chiefs with Ministry of Interior approval. The autonomy that the villages had once enjoyed, even under the French, was gone; the villages were now run by officials whose loyalties were to Diem's central government and not to the villages.

Still, most Vietnamese were reluctant to criticize the President, since he was, after all, the equivalent of the emperor and inspired, as such, a certain respect. Moreover, there was always the fear of the secret police. The criticisms that were made were cautious ones and were directed at his advisers and family. "The advisers of President Diem, especially Councilor Nhu, don't tell him what is going on," friends would tell us. "Diem is a bachelor and he doesn't understand the hardships created by the Family Law," said others. "It is the fault of that wicked Madame Nhu." It was ironic, perhaps, that Diem was so widely criticized for this overreliance on members of his own family in conducting the affairs of state. After all, family loyalty was the basis of Vietnamese society, and as hostility mounted against his regime, it was understandable that Diem would rely increasingly on people he could trust. If it was, on the one hand, easy to understand why the Vietnamese people felt alienated from the regime, it was also important to realize Diem's difficulty in compromising and in removing his brothers and his sister-in-law from positions of power. As a Vietnamese, family loyalty came first. Yet it was family loyalty that turned out to be Diem's "tragic flaw." In a sequence reminiscent of ancient Greek drama it caused the collapse of the whole House of Ngo.

When the regime fell, pro-American feeling rose to an all-time high. Vietnamese naturally credited the United States, and especially U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, with ridding them of the Diem family's tyranny. The U.S. had, indeed, cut back certain aid items to pressure Diem toward reforms. Yet Lodge himself heatedly denied any complicity in the coup. On a brief visit he once made to the IVS headquarters in Saigon, we innocently recalled having seen him with President Diem at the inauguration of a U.S.-financed atomic reactor at Dalat in October, 1963. In those last days, when it was publicly known that relations between the President and the Ambassador were strained, we had noted with interest that they seemed quite genial toward one another. At the reminder of that day, however, Lodge flared up. "I remember that very well," he said. "President Diem was just beginning to come around; he was just beginning to show some responsiveness to our suggestions—and then they killed him!" The Ambassador said this last part with great bitterness, emphasizing the "they." What struck us as ironic was that the one aspect of American policy which almost all Vietnamese thoroughly appreciated—the creating of conditions whereby Diem could be overthrown—was denied so vehemently by the U.S. government in the person of Ambassador Lodge!

The overthrow of the Diem regime was widely heralded at first as a revolution. From then on, National Day would be celebrated on November 1, the day of the coup, rather than on October 26. Streets were renamed Revolution Boulevard. The new leaders called their junta the Revolutionary Council. Would this "revolution" bring about improvement? We waited and waited, but on the whole it did not. Some commentators would call the 1963 *coup d'état* and its aftermath the "lost revolution," but Vietnamese, after a few months, ceased to refer to it as a revolution at all. Everything was the same.

"The same" meant essentially a government unresponsive to the needs and desires of the governed. The South Vietnamese government has certainly not been the only unresponsive one the world has known, as American apologists for the war often point out. What has made its problem more serious, however, is the competition

which grew increasingly fierce as the years went on—the competition of the National Liberation Front.* Although few Vietnamese believed that either government by the Liberation Front or government on the order of North Viet Nam's would be truly democratic, fewer still placed much stock in the high-principled rhetoric emanating from Saigon. This was their dilemma: they were caught in the middle with no attractive alternative.

No Vietnamese demanded that American-style democracy be fostered in Viet Nam. Most intellectuals, in this sense, agreed that conditions were far too different in the two countries to permit of such a transplantation. In a developing country with a relatively low educational level such as Viet Nam, most of them felt that strong leadership was needed. Some would even advocate a dictatorship, on the condition that the dictator be a benevolent one. Certainly a popular assembly would be important also, in order to express the desires and demands of the common people, but less stock was placed in this kind of institution than in the quality of the leader. Vietnamese knew that their lack of viable political parties or organization would reduce the political effectiveness of such an assembly unless its development were actively promoted by the national leader.

What Vietnamese expected, then, was a good leader, one who could be entrusted with the Mandate of Heaven and one whose rule would be marked by stability and perhaps progress. Traditionally, of course, the national government had not sported the trappings of modern democracy. The emperor ruled through his mandarins, and citizens had duties toward these men just as they had duties to a god who was one notch above the emperor. The government owed nothing to the people except protection and a minimum of intervention in their daily lives.

As Western ideas became known, however, the people—or more precisely the intellectuals—came to expect more. Government, according to the teachings of French and American writers, should be

* Pending further discussion in Chapter 13, we are using the terms Viet Cong (VC) and National Liberation Front (NLF) virtually interchangeably. While the latter term is a more accurate one, the former was most frequently used—at least until recent months—by the Americans and Vietnamese we are describing in this book.

"of the people, by the people, and for the people." To the Vietnamese laymen who may have heard of these new concepts, particularly as they were copied in the Diem constitution, this meant that their government should be responsive. It meant the government should strive for social justice by easing the burdens of the poor who suffered at the expense of the rich. It seemed to mean that peasants should not be exploited by landlords, that the poor should have equal rights before the police and in the courts, and that the government should help the people to improve their lives. If these ideas had never been given much consideration before, they certainly were when the Viet Minh fanned out through the countryside during and after the war against the colonialist French. Yet the governments that followed Diem's showed little understanding of what was required to respond to these new demands. And even if they had understood, the necessary conditions of stability were lacking.

When the reins of power were assumed by the popular and genial General Duong Van "Big" Minh, in conjunction (cooperation would not have been the right word, as it turned out) with two other generals who had been instrumental in the *coup d'état*, there was an outburst of hope. The new regime made gestures of reconciliation toward previously anti-Diem religious groups such as the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao, and of course the Buddhists. It released thousands of prisoners. The whole atmosphere reflected a sudden lifting of tensions, and dancing and the singing of sentimental songs, once banned by Madame Nhu, reappeared immediately. Yet this period of hope soon turned to disappointment. The coup gave rise to even more indecisiveness than was evident in the last trembling days of the Diemist bureaucrats. The salaries of rural workers and the implementation of new programs were even further delayed by confusion. There were massive changes in personnel, and it seemed as though almost everyone in government had to start from scratch learning a new job. All of us, to be sure, had expected some period of confusion as the government reorganized. We expected to see our work bog down in bureaucratic delays as personnel were changed around and as new programs replaced old ones. We did not know, but we hoped, that things would improve. Then, in January

of 1964, when Minh had been in office less than three months, we heard the news that a little-known general, Nguyen Khanh, had pulled another coup in Saigon.

The idea of Khanh's taking power in place of a previously ineffectual triumvirate under Minh was not altogether displeasing. On the other hand, we shared the opinion of many: if coups and counter-coups should become a way of life, the constant series of personnel and power changes throughout the country could, in practice, minimize the possibility of any positive government action at all. Khanh did, it seemed, consolidate a good deal of power behind him, and it was presumably in acknowledgment of this fact that the Americans embraced him so warmly. At the unusual hour of three o'clock in the morning, as Khanh staged the coup, he was actually seen in the company of three American advisers. Yet, few Vietnamese trusted or liked Khanh; they considered him an opportunist.

One American who embraced him with a fraternal devotion was U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara. Beginning in this period a long series of visits to Viet Nam, each of which wedded the unpopular Saigon regime ever more closely to the Americans in Vietnamese eyes, McNamara would troop with Khanh about the countryside. To him, Khanh represented Viet Nam. As the two men would raise their arms high in a joint victory gesture, McNamara would shout, in a humorous attempt at the Vietnamese language, "Viet Nam Muon Nam"—Long live Viet Nam. Unfortunately, and unbeknown to McNamara since he could not hear the ripples of laughter he generated, the Secretary's pronunciation gave a different meaning to his intended triumphant message—"the southern duck wants to lie down."

Khanh's rule was marked by a unique sense of melodrama. To the Vietnamese with whom we worked and associated every day, he was a ruthless power-seeker. His black goatee made him appear at once evil and comic. If we remarked on having seen him drive by in his black Mercedes, Vietnamese would ask with a resigned chuckle, "Did you see his beard?" This, perhaps, was an insignificant reaction on their part; yet such reactions told much (to those who listened) about how the Vietnamese felt about their government. At one

point he shaved the goatee off, proclaiming the "new Khanh." But the new Khanh was no different from the old.

Khanh's melodramatic flair was best demonstrated by his various reactions to criticism and attempted coups. When he engineered a bill giving himself dictatorial powers, for example, hostile students in Saigon marched on the Palace in mass demonstration against his "despotic act" (see Chapter 12). Khanh was courageous enough to appear before them in person. Then, feeling humiliated by their opposition to his action, he flew off to Dalat in his private plane and pouted. Every time something went wrong in Saigon, he would take off for Dalat, or occasionally for the seaside resort of Vung Tau, confusing journalists by circulating among the various palaces placed at his disposal. (In Dalat alone there were three.) When a plane was heard taking off from Dalat's Camly Airfield late in the night, people in the town knew that the situation had quieted down in Saigon. Khanh was on his way back again.

During the period of Khanh's ascendancy, lasting about a year, it was not always clear who was really in power. Various others would be announced as having taken over, but shortly afterward the resilient Khanh always popped up again. For two days in August, 1964, for example, a ruling triumvirate of generals was announced, and then came a week of interregnum under economist Nguyen Xuan Oanh. (As deputy prime minister, Harvard-trained Oanh would again take the fore, at least technically, for a twenty-day period in early 1965.) It was during this period that we lost all track of what was going on in Saigon's political netherworld. Vietnamese complained more and more about the devious machinations of the military officers, each of whom upon gaining power promised to rule only a few weeks or months and then to organize free elections for a civilian government. But power corrupted, and they ended up playing musical chairs among themselves as they jockeyed for positions of ever greater authority. Rumors of coups were rife, and martial music was heard frequently on the radio as various generals and colonels proclaimed their interest in "saving the fatherland."

In late 1964, a long-awaited civilian government emerged under the respected former schoolteacher Tran Van Huong. This

offered some hope, since the cause of the previous turmoil had appeared to be largely the inner wranglings of the army officer corps. Our friends and associates, who were of course civilians, were pleased at this escape from rule by the military. But it was during Huong's time in office that the true reality of Vietnamese power politics became known to those of us who had been perhaps too naïve on the subject before. That reality was the undeniable fact of military predominance in politics. The military, after all, had the organization and the discipline (relatively speaking, at least) and, above all, the arms and support of the Americans. There was, in fact, a similar power struggle between military and civilian elements on the American side, and as the war heated up in late 1964 and thereafter, the military seemed to win out among both Vietnamese and Americans.

Tran Van Huong did not last long in office. On the surface, his downfall was attributed to Buddhist demonstrations against him and what they called his "anti-Buddhist policies." These began in Hue and included strong criticisms of American policy, culminating in the January, 1965, burning of the U.S. Information Service library there. Less than three years later, however, when the possibility of Buddhist support for Huong's presidential candidacy was aired, some Vietnamese were suggesting that Huong himself could not be blamed for the policies leading to his downfall. It was rather General Khanh, that ubiquitous *eminence grise* and then commander-in-chief of the armed forces, who was behind it all. Upon hearing of a plan calling for elections, Khanh had become afraid of what this would mean to his position. His opposition became so belligerent, in fact, that even the Americans finally lost patience, and Ambassador Maxwell Taylor bluntly told Khanh he should leave the country. In what was intended to be a clever move, Khanh had recorded the Ambassador's words on tape, and he played them back (the conversation had been in French) at a subsequent junta meeting. The other generals were supposed to react angrily toward the Americans, and Khanh thundered that he did not want a colonialist envoy. The overly ambitious Khanh lost out, however, and was finally sent abroad as a "roving ambassador." Melodramatic to the end, he boarded his plane with a little plastic sack of Vietnamese soil and a

vow to the effect that "I shall return." He now resides comfortably in Paris, where Vietnamese Embassy officials claim not even to know his street address.

In February, 1965, the respected Dr. Phan Huy Quat came to the fore in another attempt at civilian rule. Although Quat seemed to have many of the necessary personal qualifications for the post of prime minister, he never really had a chance. Most of his four months in office were marked by frustrated attempts at forming a cabinet satisfactory to all the various factions in Saigon. Besides, he was largely unknown to the Vietnamese people. (In fact, this was true of every leader after Diem, with the possible exception of General Minh.) In one model village, by way of example, we noted flags flying everywhere and were told a VIP delegation had just departed. "Who was it?" we asked. "Some colonel," a villager answered. When we questioned the local district chief, however, we discovered that the visitor had been Prime Minister Quat himself! Internal fights and differences with his chief-of-state, Phan Khac Suu, finally led Quat to call on the military "to save the country." On June 12, 1965, the trim, mustachioed Air Vice-Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky came into office.

Ky was ecstatically greeted by the Americans. He was one of the "Young Turks," the new generation of military leaders who were energetic, progressive, and clearly nationalistic. More important, Ky spoke good English, better than any leader before him (with the possible exception of Khanh). Thus the Americans felt they could deal with him. But the main reason the Americans greeted Ky with such enthusiasm was the reason the climber Mallory gave when asked why he wanted to climb Mt. Everest: "Because it is there." For the Americans it had been the same with Khanh and with all the other leaders who had risen to power: whoever was strong enough to take over was presumed strong enough, with immediate American support, to provide stability. And what Viet Nam needed above all—as indeed our own experiences with the bureaucracy had indicated—was stability. With American involvement now including the bombing of the North, and with the bitter experience of ten successive Saigon governments in twenty months, the United States could not afford any more fooling around on the part of ambitious

Saigon soldiers and politicians. The situation had become far too serious for that. Unity and stability were needed in order to prosecute the war against the Viet Cong. Even the question of whether or not Ky himself was the right man for the job was no longer relevant. Who else, Embassy officials asked rhetorically, was there?

At the beginning, in fact, Ky did not seem such a bad choice. He had the strength of the air force behind him, he had the backing of many student groups with whom he enjoyed the affinity of youth, and he was generally considered to be honest, patriotic, intelligent, and fearless. While his chief-of-state, Nguyen Van Thieu, remained largely unknown and in the background, Ky eventually became known among his countrymen, though largely because of his longevity in office and his flamboyance.

It was this latter trait that made Ky a poor choice in the long run. He was too young and too boyish in a society where age and seriousness of purpose are respected. Somehow, the Mandate of Heaven did not fit him. Darting about in black cap, purple scarf, and yellow gloves, Ky was the exact antithesis of what, according to tradition, a Vietnamese leader should be. His current wife, a stunning former Air Vietnam stewardess, did not contribute to his nationalist image by traveling to Japan for plastic surgery on her nose and eyes, intended to make her look less Vietnamese and more Western. Acquaintances of Ky's, who had served with him in the French army in North Viet Nam before Geneva, confidentially expressed their personal dislike of him. He was nothing but an impetuous playboy, they said. He didn't have what it takes.

While Americans emphasized Ky's good characteristics, which certainly existed, the Vietnamese tended to follow their native intuition when it came to national leadership. Any prime minister who, for example, on a state visit to Taiwan, performed daredevil stunts at the controls of a jet trainer, might titillate his hosts but hardly the public back home in Viet Nam. On another occasion, Ky made an even more clownish impression. It was on July 20, 1965, officially known in South Viet Nam as the "Day of National Shame," signifying as it did the anniversary of the signing of the Geneva Accords by which the country was divided in two. All through the morning, truckload after truckload of local inhabitants were brought from

the surrounding vicinity to the banks of the Ben Hai River. The Ben Hai, flowing through the middle of the Demilitarized Zone on its way to the sea, marks the border between North and South Viet Nam. Sometime in mid-morning, after thousands had been assembled, the sound of planes could be heard overhead. One, a Vietnamese Air Force Skyraider, flew so close to the border itself that, in full view of the crowds on the south bank, North Vietnamese guns across the river started shooting away. Taking the hint, the Skyraider finally doubled back. The only purpose of the aerial show, it turned out, was to announce the arrival, by car, of Prime Minister Ky. Not content with this display, Ky proceeded to act like a comedian on the speaker's platform. He made funny faces and silly gestures. The onlookers could hardly be impressed by the quality of their prime minister. Those standing around us kept repeating in amused disbelief, "Oh, look how Mr. Ky is fooling around!"

Ky's personal faults were more than matched by the difficulties of the situation. Governing South Viet Nam, with all its divisions and the war besides, was perhaps the hardest job in the world. Any step in one direction would be criticized from another. The fact that he got along well with the American Embassy (Lodge called him "my second son") led nationalist Vietnamese to call him an American puppet. Later, when he publicly berated the Americans, the Vietnamese would sense the truth but still question his emotional stability. Ky once called himself "a tragic man," and in lucid moments he confessed his uncertainties about himself. In May, 1968, when he was vice-president and losing power steadily to the new president, Nguyen Van Thieu, he raised the leadership problem in an extemporaneous Saigon speech:

The whole world respects Ho Chi Minh and [North Vietnamese] Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap. Why? Who are they? Are they not Vietnamese too? Why can't we find a man in the South and make him be respected by the whole world? Is it because our leaders are nothing but old fashioned slaves? Perhaps I am partly responsible for this. Perhaps I haven't performed my duty with all my might and that's why our nation is still the way it is. If it is any mistake of mine, I am ready to be judged by the people and by history.

Ky will not be the only one judged by history.

During the period 1963–1966, American officials always had the idea of elections in the back of their mind. They felt, quite reasonably, that if the Vietnamese people could choose their own government, then the cause of stability would be advanced through that government's legitimacy. The Vietnamese looked at it somewhat differently. They—that is the intellectuals—were all in favor of both elections and stability, but for them government legitimacy itself was the key goal. For the American Mission, it seemed, stability was the necessary goal, for the Americans had to sell their administration's Viet Nam policy to Congress and to the American people. For this purpose, stability under a truly popular government was not required, because the American people had no way of judging what was or was not popular. But the Vietnamese could tell the difference, and they had little use for an unpopular but superficially stable government like Ky's. Theoretically, of course, only a popular government would in time become a really stable government, but the U.S. Mission was short of time—and, it must be said, of understanding for Vietnamese feelings.

As a result of the antigovernment Struggle Movement in 1966, which came desperately near to overthrowing the Ky regime (see Chapter 6), the Saigon government was forced to hold elections for a constituent assembly. The first job of such a group would be to draft a constitution, since there had been none in effect since Diem's fall, the country having been ruled for the most part by military decree. The mixed American attitude toward such elections was expressed by Ambassador Lodge, back for his second tour at the Embassy. Before the Struggle Movement, Lodge had gone on record as being against elections for the near future. Like Ky, he felt they would be too difficult to organize under wartime conditions. When the strength of the Struggle Movement's pressure became felt, however, Lodge suddenly decided that elections were a good thing and that he had been for them all along. Although the NLF were excluded from participation (which under the circumstances was hardly surprising), and in spite of a militant Buddhist boycott, the elections of 1966 went amazingly well. Subsequent balloting for hamlet and village office was also relatively successful, as was the final framing of a new national constitution—an act

marred only by President Johnson's reportedly hailing it as the best gift he could ever receive, one comparable to his first look at his baby grandchild. Most Vietnamese were not pleased at the idea of Lyndon Johnson being the grandfather of their country.

It was the crucial presidential and legislative elections of 1967, however, that caused so many Vietnamese, and ourselves, so much dismay. The central problem, and one not unique to Vietnam, was the power of the incumbents to sway the vote in their favor. It was for that reason that the militant Buddhist hierarchy had gone so far in its Struggle demands as to insist on the resignation of Ky and Thieu before the campaign period. They did not succeed, however, and as a result, electioneering began well ahead of the one-month period permitted to the civilian candidates. Three months before election day, for example, signs that read "The government of Nguyen Cao Ky is the government of the poor people" appeared all over the country. In a sense, this was only a minor affront, since no one believed the slogan anyway. Most Vietnamese would point out that it was true that the Ky government was the government of the poor, but only in the sense that its corrupt leaders sucked the people completely dry.

One of the IVS volunteers saved himself some money by striking a responsive chord in taxi drivers who did not take the Ky signs seriously. Like many Vietnamese, taxi drivers assumed that we were rich like most Americans in Viet Nam, and they would try to charge us the "rich American" price. This price was usually anywhere from 30 to 100 per cent more than the Vietnamese price. The clever volunteer, when confronted with the cost of a taxi ride, explained to the driver (in Vietnamese) that he was working for the Vietnamese government which, as all the signs indicated (he said with a smile), was the government of the poor people. "Therefore," he said, "I am poor and should only pay the Vietnamese price." The driver would burst out laughing. "Oh, you know much about our country," he would say. Accepting only the normal price, he would drive off, still chuckling.

Others of us used the same joke as a way of pointing out that we were not ordinary, wealthy Americans. Invariably the taxi drivers would laugh uproariously. "Those signs tell a lie," they would say.

"The government does nothing for the poor people. They just make money for themselves." One complained about the new water system built by the government with massive U.S. aid: "The problem with your water system," he said, "is that the pipes all go to the cement houses. I live in a thatch house and have to buy my water from the rich people."

Nevertheless, the fact that the Ky government had been in power for over two years gave its leaders the advantage of being better known than any of the ten civilian politicians represented on the presidential ballot. In one village of Montagnards (see Chapter 4) we noted that flimsy wooden guide rails had been built around the schoolhouse in order to usher the lines of voters into the polls two weeks later. Intrigued, we asked the schoolteacher, an old friend, for whom he was planning to vote.

"For Ky, of course," he replied.

"But Ky is only running for vice-president," we pointed out, the military junta having recently decided on its Thieu-Ky ticket.

"Oh, isn't there any way I can get him to be president?" our friend, now disappointed, inquired.

"No, he's just running for vice-president," we told him. "Why do you like him so much, anyway?" we asked.

"Oh, he's a very good man," the teacher answered with confidence and enthusiasm. "He talks good on the radio!"

"But have you seen any results of the things he's promised on the radio?" we countered, knowing the teacher would not resent our queries.

"Well, how should I know about that?" he asked.

Perplexed as to whether he knew any of the other candidates, we then asked why he didn't consider voting for Tran Van Huong, at that point the favored civilian candidate.

"Oh yes, Dr. Luong, I know about him," our friend replied. But we had to correct him. Dr. Luong was a physician in the provincial capital whom he was confusing with candidate Huong. We explained that Huong was a former schoolteacher and prime minister.

When our friend heard that he had been a schoolteacher like himself, he showed momentary interest, but then finally said, "No,

I'm going to vote for Ky. I've never seen the other man's picture anywhere."

In terms of equal opportunity for all the candidates, Ky's ticket was so far ahead of all the others in "equality" that it was surprising when he and Thieu garnered less than 35 per cent of the ballots cast.

In addition to exploiting the advantages of incumbency, Thieu and Ky were able to neutralize their most powerful opposition by keeping them in exile or by refusing them permission to run. General "Big" Minh, for example, whose popularity posed a threat to the government in power, was kept in exile in Bangkok during this time. Another exiled and popular general, Nguyen Chanh Thi, was questioned by Ky's national police chief, General Nguyen Ngoc Loan, on a special trip to Washington, D.C. When Thi refused to declare his support for Ky and to join Ky's ticket as vice-president, he was kept in exile. Au Truong Thanh, the other leading contender, and a liberal, was refused candidate status because of his alleged "pro-Communist neutralism." Truong Dinh Dzu, a somewhat disreputable lawyer who came in second in the balloting because he openly made himself the "peace candidate," wisely announced his "white dove" platform and indictments of Thieu and Ky only after his candidacy had been approved. After the election, he spent much of his time in jail before being sentenced by a military tribunal (and without appeal) to five years of hard labor for his political speeches during the campaign. Finally, there was a general belief in Vietnamese circles, partly fostered by Ky, that if Thieu and Ky did not win, they would pull a *coup d'état* against whoever did succeed. All these factors, plus the knowledge that the Americans were supporting the military ticket, made their winning inevitable. No Vietnamese ever doubted it for a minute. Again, it was surprising they did not win more than 35 per cent of the total vote.

Perhaps the most ludicrous aspect of the entire process, however, was the American position. One American friend, with years of experience in Viet Nam, pointed out to the highest Embassy officials that most Vietnamese did not support Thieu and Ky. He suggested

that the U.S. government urge truly free elections. Within days this friend went back to the United States and has not been allowed to return to Viet Nam since. In Washington, Assistant Secretary of State William Bundy had stated privately that "these elections are our last hope in Viet Nam." With such desperation in high administration circles, it was hardly surprising that when Henry Cabot Lodge arrived in Saigon as head of a team of twenty-two election observers sent by President Johnson, he expressed confidence that everything about the elections would prove to be above-board. Our Vietnamese colleagues, however, expressed considerable dismay over the activities of some of the observers they met or saw. They told us that several had dropped in for only a few moments at two or three polling places, then were rushed off for sumptuous meals given in their honor, usually by the local province chief. What the observers could not see, they added, were voters who were paid off by zealous government officials, military men who had received two voting cards (one through their families and another through their military unit), polling places with an insufficient number of ballots, and some ballots with the names of certain candidates missing. Some of these irregularities were of course unintentional, but others were deliberate. Finally, and particularly in the legislative elections, there were simply too many names from which to choose—a source of great frustration to voters who usually hadn't heard of any of them. One old woman, for example, angrily threw her bundle of ballots on the floor, not knowing how she could possibly be expected to make a sensible decision.

While President Johnson's observers returned to the United States with generally glowing accounts of what they had seen in their four days, Vietnamese colleagues, who knew the whole background, felt differently. "In many ways, the elections have only made our situation worse," lamented one. "They have seemingly legitimized the *status quo* of war and foreign intervention which we hate." "You held the elections to convince the American public that Viet Nam has a democracy," said another. A third cynically announced, "We are planning to send twenty-two Vietnamese observers who don't speak English to the United States in November, 1968, for four days, to see if your elections are fair."

In March 1968, the incredible Ky himself, now vice-president, gave his comments on the elections in an interview with an Italian journalist:

In most of the cases, the men who have been elected in South Vietnam are not the men that people want; they do not represent the people. The people voted for them because someone told them to vote. Our last elections were a loss of time and money, a mockery. They were only useful to elect a regime which is wrong and corrupted and weak and would fall immediately with a revolution.

It is hard for me to say so because I share the responsibility of those elections, I have been voted in them and I am the Vice President of such a regime. But at least I recognize the evil where the evil is, and I say that laws must be changed, because what we now have are laws that defend the rich. We need new laws to defend the poor.*

Meanwhile, and before President Thieu began to consolidate his own power, a Vietnamese friend described the new form of government. Power, he said, was divided among four competing forces: (1) the U.S. Embassy; (2) the two houses of the Saigon Legislature; (3) the three "cabinets" of Thieu, Ky, and Loc (the latter was soon replaced as prime minister by Tran Van Huong); (4) the four tactical zones and their commanding generals. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that the elections did little to win popular confidence for the government. Thus, while Embassy officials hailed the "new government," Vietnamese saw it as the same old regime. The only thing that had been proved was that an election could, technically, be carried off even under wartime conditions.

Since Johnson's election-observers could not understand Vietnamese, and since they knew little about Viet Nam, they could not possibly have learned the truth about the elections—or about their aftermath. But that has always been the problem: Americans have rarely known the truth about Viet Nam. When the same leaders as before were "inaugurated" in Saigon on October 31, 1967, Vice-President Humphrey was dispatched as the ranking American representative for the ceremony. Remarked one Vietnamese in Hue, "His attendance reminds us of the old days when the Chinese emperor,

* Quoted in *Washington Post*, April 7, 1968.

our ultimate sovereign, would send a delegate to supervise our vassal emperor's coronation."

Later, when the Embassy claimed that the Thieu government was making progress toward needed reforms throughout 1968, Vietnamese noted that the regime conducted overly thorough "witch hunts" after the Tet offensive, summarily closed down newspapers, arrested and sentenced even anti-Communist opponents, and generally dragged its feet on many liberalization moves that the people were demanding. Though some Vietnamese had seen promise in the Legislature, particularly in the somewhat representative Lower House, even this hope disappeared when in the course of 1968 it accomplished little. Some said that more time was required, but the problem was that Viet Nam never had much time. Others said that what Viet Nam needed was a genuine revolution.

And so, over the years, the political system has gone along, never very popular with its constituents, never very responsive to their wishes, yet surviving somehow in spite of various changes at the top, influences from outside, and even *insurrection from within*. The whole succession of leaders from Diem to Thieu seem to Vietnamese to have had much in common with one another. None of them could ease the burdens of life, bring about a harmony of spirit, or fulfill the Mandate of Heaven.

[4]

PLIGHT OF THE MINORITY

The Highland Tribespeople

Driving the few miles from Ban Me Thuot to Buon Kmrong Prong was an arduous experience in the rainy season, for the last part of the road was like a mud bog. Few people went there at any time of year, but during the rainy season it seemed especially isolated. Ban Me Thuot itself, particularly in the late summer of 1963, was not a bustling metropolis, even though it was the chief market and administrative center for Darlac province. Its market place was a melting pot of the Highlands, where Montagnards of several different tribes jostled with the Vietnamese and Chinese living in the town. Throughout the day, raucous sounds emanated from the streets and from public loudspeakers. The tribespeople were always distinguishable here by their darker skin and colorful dress. Sometimes they came into town on three-wheeled Lambrettas, but more often they walked along the sides of the roads, carrying in wood, squash, and cucumbers, and carrying out the wonders of the market: gongs, black cotton cloth, and salt. We often stopped to give rides to as many as could be accommodated in our jeep.

Coming from Saigon, some 250 air miles to the south, Ban Me Thuot was in the middle of nowhere; coming from Ban Me Thuot, the strategic hamlet of Buon Kmrong Prong was the frontier. To some of the military and government officials, this frontier looked like "Indian country"—and indeed was called, in the lingo of the times, "VC country." Ever-present danger overshadowed any possible constructive improvements for the inhabitants. To young volunteers, however, it was the "new frontier," where disease and illiteracy would have to be eradicated and where concentration of the

previously seminomadic people in strategic hamlets could facilitate modernization.

Everything about Buon Kmrong Prong gave an impression of neatness and order. The bamboo stakes between the rows of barbed-wire fencing formed pleasant patterns, and one forgot momentarily the dangers that had led the villagers to drive them patiently into the soil. Inside the spacious perimeter of the hamlet fence, the bamboo and thatch longhouses of the Rhade tribesmen were neatly arranged in rows. Built on stilts, they could be entered only by placing one's feet sideways in the notches of a propped-up log. Animals were thus prevented from intruding.

We had come to Buon Kmrong Prong to help dig a well. To us, developing a source of relatively clean drinking water was one of the most urgent needs in the Highland villages where dysentery has always been a terrible scourge. It was, however, a need not always evident to the local people, who regarded river water as quite adequate. For us to claim that there were evil microbes in the water was to substitute one form of invisible spirit for another; a much more convincing argument to the Montagnards was that digging a well would save the half-mile walk to and from the river.

One day after the well had been completed we were invited to join the mourners at the funeral of one of the hamlet's notables, a member of the Tribal Law Court in Ban Me Thuot. "He was in the hospital for three months," one of his closest friends explained. "His stomach was all puffed out. Then the doctors sent him home again, saying he wasn't sick any more. Not sick, but now he's dead. Yes, it is true—not even these modern doctors know everything."

As we waited for the funeral to begin, Y Klar came up. He had worked with Americans for a few months and knew some English. He also knew that we were interested in learning about the customs of his tribe. "Rhade customs are very different from Vietnamese customs," he said. "Rhades have very happy funerals, Vietnamese very sad." We told him that American funerals were very sad, like Vietnamese. As the festivities got under way, however, we began to wonder whether the Rhades did not have a better approach. The spirit being liberated, according to the theology, why not show joy rather than grief?

With about two hundred Montagnards gathered outside the longhouse where the coffin was lying, the ceremonies started in full force. At first they were mournful enough. There was music—the heavy bonging of gongs, the thumping of a huge drum, the warbling sound of a wind instrument—intertwined with the chanting of the mourners in the longhouse and the horrendous trumpeting of the hamlet elephants. At midday the coffin was moved to the grave site just outside the village fence, and as the music continued, a shaman, dressed in red, smeared buffalo blood on one end of the coffin and performed a ritual chant. The dead man's best friend then gave a eulogy, after which an urn containing the deceased's crossbow, blanket, bracelets, and other articles was placed in the grave. Meanwhile, the group of women had been wailing and dabbing their eyes with handkerchiefs. As the coffin itself was lowered, the heavens burst forth as if to add their tears to those of the women. The men hurriedly filled the grave with dirt.

After the shower the mourners began to ease their sadness with food and drink. We began to see why Y Klar had prepared us for a happy funeral. The meat of three water buffalo that had been sacrificed that morning was served, and dozens of jars of rice wine that had been carefully guarded from premature consumption were brought forth. The participants soon reached a stage of advanced giddiness and grew quite cheery, interrupting their laughter only long enough to empty bladders or doze off. Such parties, we knew, could go on for days. Sadness, as Y Klar said, was not the predominant mood of Montagnard funerals.

But if sadness was secondary at funerals it was not so for life in general. For the Montagnards even more than for the Vietnamese, the stresses of modernization were upsetting, adding emotional burdens to those brought about by the rigors of war.

There are thought to be nearly a million Montagnards in South Viet Nam. Divided into about thirty main tribes and language groupings, they were collectively called Montagnards by the French, the name meaning "Mountaineers." Since the French days, life has changed for them probably more than for any other group in the country. They were accustomed to roaming the forests, but

the war has necessitated their agglomeration within the bounds of fortified hamlets. They had lived by a slash-and-burn economy, planting their rice in one place until the yield became too low, then moving on to clear off new hillsides and valleys for planting. Now, with movement restricted, the population more concentrated, and land less available, they have had to learn an entirely new economy and way of life. Once accustomed to an independent, even isolated, social and cultural existence, they now have had to learn to live side by side with strangers to their lands—the ethnic Vietnamese.

The Montagnards were there first, believed to have migrated into the Vietnamese Highlands some two thousand years ago. American anthropologists have devoted relatively little attention to these people, though they have been divided into two very general language groupings. One, the Mon-Khmer, includes such tribes as the Koho around the present town of Dalat; they are thought to have come originally from what are now Burma and Cambodia. The other, the Malayo-Polynesian, includes such tribes as the Rhade around Ban Me Thuot; they are believed to have migrated up the Malay Peninsula from Indonesia. To the sensitive, history was full of precedents: "You see," said one well-educated Koho friend who had read a history of his own people, "we have always suffered discrimination. Thousands of years ago we were expelled from our original homelands and we settled here. Now the Vietnamese are colonizing our lands here. They are trying to exterminate us. Where will we go next?"

While there is no certain historical indication why the early Montagnards left their original lands centuries ago, it is true that the Vietnamese have made inroads into the Highlands. This has happened particularly since 1954, when hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese left North Viet Nam and many were settled on the vast, sparsely inhabited plateau of the South. Later, President Diem's land-development program settled another large group on land the Montagnards felt was rightfully theirs. Even then, however, there was little contact between the two ethnic groups until the new outbreak of war forced the Montagnards into the lower ground nearer the Vietnamese centers. Where the French had shown a special affection for the good and simple mountain people, offering

them plantation jobs and limited education and status in their army, the Vietnamese, for a variety of psychological reasons, looked down on them, sometimes referring to them as "dirty and primitive savages." Of course there were exceptions in the form of some young liberals with a developed social conscience. But more typical was the Dalat high-school student who asked, "Why do you like them so much? The Montagnards are so dirty." We American volunteers tried to bridge the gap between the two groups. When a provincial education chief said, "You know, in many ways I have come to admire the Montagnards more than my fellow Vietnamese," then we felt we had accomplished something significant for future harmony in Viet Nam.

Y Bli's story is a typical one for a Montagnard in South Viet Nam. His village was at Buon Dak Sak, located south and west of Ban Me Thuot. When he was small, he lived the traditional slash-and-burn life of his people. Every three years, his small village would shift fields, cutting down the forest and planting upland rice, a special variety requiring considerably less water than the delta paddy rice. In addition to rice, they grew corn, gourds, squash, pumpkins, peppers, and eggplant. Tobacco was planted in the location of the previous year's buffalo pen, where the earth had been fertilized by manure. As a boy, Y Bli set traps in the mountain streams to catch the tiny fish. He and the other children also caught crickets, a delicacy either cooked or raw. They developed an interesting technique: in the evenings and after the first spring rains had fallen, holes would open up in the ground. Y Bli and his little friends took cattails, or a similar plant, and inserted them into jars containing the biting red ants so common in the Highlands. Then they stuck the cattails with the ants clinging to them into the holes in the ground. The rest was automatic: the ants bit the crickets and drove them out of the holes where the boys were ready to grab them. After brushing the ants off the crickets and into an ant jar, they placed the crickets into a separate cricket jar. Y Bli could collect nearly a pint of crickets in an hour. The occasional sacrifices of their domestic animals and the shooting of a wild deer or boar in the forest added to the Montagnards' limited diet.

As for industry, village activities were limited to three: one was that of the local blacksmith, whose unique hand-bellows fanned the flames of the tiny campfire foundry in which he fashioned crude metal farming tools. A second was that of the women who wove blankets, also used as skirts, on their wooden handlooms. The third was the somewhat less specialized one of making crossbows for hunting as well as various bead necklaces and ornamental handicrafts.

With Y Bli's tribe, marriage came upon the invitation of the girl's family and was sealed by an exchange of bracelets made of brass. The husband then went to live in the longhouse of his wife's family. Y Bli was a sturdy, good-looking boy who got married early, at the age of sixteen. Jokingly, we asked him why he married so young. He answered with a grin and a shrug: "Her mother pursued me relentlessly, so I had no choice!" Soon afterward, in early 1963, Y Bli joined the Special Forces, a branch of the army popular with the Montagnards because they were trained separately from the Vietnamese and were allowed to serve in their native Highlands. Y Bli joined because he wanted to defend his people from the Viet Cong, because he liked adventure, and because he felt this was the way to advance. In franker moments he would add that with the Special Forces he could assert his identity against the Vietnamese—both those of the Viet Cong and those of the Saigon government.

Y Bli was sent for training to Camp Buon Ea Nao in Ban Me Thuot. He liked it there, his children could go to school, and he was making money. To be sure, he missed his village at first. At night he would seem to hear the familiar sounds of the pounding of rice and the joyous shouting of the children romping in the golden rice fields or splashing about in the river. But he was young, the outside world was an adventure, and it did not take him long to break the links with his traditional world. He had gold caps put on his teeth, which had been filed down earlier according to the practice of his tribe. In the market place he had contact with Vietnamese, but was hurt to note that his people, inexperienced in the ways of commerce, were being taken advantage of by the shrewd town merchants.

Y Bli began to see, understand, and become bitter about the dis-

crimination against his people. He asked the questions posed by underprivileged minorities everywhere: How can we lift ourselves out of this rut when many in the majority, who control the economy, profit from our backwardness? How can we educate ourselves without people trained to be teachers and when our young men and women find it difficult to get into the schools? How can we use our own resources when we don't have the capital to get started and when we must accept lower wages if we are to get jobs at all? Where does one start? Is it practical to try to break down the barriers by educating our own people? Should we remain, in the eyes of the majority, the jovial but ignorant children of the forest? Or should we smash the chains of discrimination by revolution? Y Bli found himself obsessed by these questions. He tried to work out solutions by himself, and he discussed them and argued about them with his fellow Montagnard soldiers.

Early in 1964, Y Bli was transferred to another camp at Buon Sarpa. Here, with Cambodia and the guerrilla infiltration routes not far away, he participated in border surveillance patrols. But the commanding officers at Buon Sarpa were Vietnamese, and before long the new arrival felt the ethnic tensions weighing still more heavily on him. There were good reasons why they should. For example, Montagnard soldiers were not always paid the full amount they had coming to them. Besides that, the Vietnamese officers sometimes sent Montagnards out on operations without going along to share in the danger. When the officers did go along, they had Montagnard coolies carry their packs. There were smaller grievances as well. Vietnamese officers often failed to return the salutes of the Montagnard soldiers, and the Montagnards felt that the enterprising Vietnamese barbers who had set up business at Buon Sarpa were overcharging for haircuts. Y Bli began to wonder what he was fighting for. "We fought for the French and got nothing," he said. "Now we fight for the Vietnamese and *they* give us nothing."

Finally, on September 19, 1964, the Montagnard leaders at Buon Sarpa—like others elsewhere in the Highlands—revolted. At one o'clock in the morning they shot eleven Vietnamese officers. They raised the Montagnard flag over Buon Sarpa and tied the Vietnamese commander to the flagpole. The Americans in the camp looked

helplessly on. Certainly they were opposed to the violence, but they had always tended to sympathize with the underdog Montagnards. (Eventually, the Americans were evacuated by helicopter.) The revolt lasted eight days, and in all the Highlands more than eighty Vietnamese were killed. Y Bham, a famous man to the young tribesmen, visited Buon Sarpa during this time. He had spent five years in jail in Hue for his role in an earlier rebellion and was the leader of the Montagnard nationalist movement, *FULRO* (*Front Uni pour la Libération des Races Opprimées—United Front for the Liberation of the Oppressed Races*). After the 1964 revolt, Y Bham, with some of the Buon Sarpa leaders and a few hundred followers, remained in the near vicinity of the Cambodian border (some thought actually in Cambodia).

At Buon Sarpa the revolt ended when a Vietnamese armed force, larger than was customarily used against the Viet Cong, arrived from Ban Me Thuot. The Montagnards surrendered. General Nguyen Khanh, then prime minister, came for a ceremony at which the Vietnamese flag replaced the Montagnard colors. The two adversaries exchanged pistols and made new promises to each other.

For Y Bli, who knew little of the larger politics, the whole series of events formed a memorable experience. After the revolt, he returned to Ban Me Thuot, then was transferred further north and east to An Khe, where in the spring of 1965 he participated in a military operation to open the Viet Cong-held Route 19. Nearly two hundred allied soldiers were killed in this operation, and Y Bli, while uninjured, became more and more discouraged at seeing his friends fall one after the other. He resolved to quit the Special Forces and, without permission, headed once again for Ban Me Thuot. The last time we met, Y Bli was very depressed. "I cannot return to my village," he said, "because life there is strange to me now. Besides, if I did return, the VC would retaliate against me. Or perhaps the *FULRO* would try to recruit me. Yet I cannot return to the Special Forces, for I left them before. Even though I like the military life, it is no good to fight for the Vietnamese who take advantage of us. They will not give me a job here, either. There is nothing to do."

Y Bli is not lazy. He does not want to live off his relatives. Like

many of his peers, he is confused. He is disoriented not only by the consequences of war, but by the fact of being a member of a minority group in a seemingly alien master society.

"I am a soldier," he said. "I cannot go back to my village. I have forgotten the ways of planting rice. My dream is for the independence of my people. The old village is for my parents and grandparents. There is something different for me." Yet Y Bli cannot articulate what that something is. The complexities are too great, and he cannot cope with the demands made upon himself and his people by the inevitable coming of modernization.

For the Montagnards, moving into strategic hamlets has often been upsetting. Unable to roam at will in the forests because of the dangers of war, they have had to learn intensive, rather than extensive, cultivation. Now, if the soil nutrients are used up, they cannot simply clear new land and move to a new location. They must stay where they are and cope. They must learn to diversify their crops, to utilize the manure from their animals as fertilizer, and to use commercial fertilizers and insecticides. This much they must learn just to maintain their previous level; if they are to escape the ancient curses of disease and to improve their living standards, they must learn more. Planting new vegetables and raising improved breeds of pigs and chickens can furnish them with a more balanced diet, thereby cutting down on disease. Because living conditions have become more crowded, they must develop sanitary water and toilet facilities. And part and parcel of all this is the need for education, to develop the ability of the people to adapt to new conditions. All this has to come sooner or later to the Montagnards, just as it has been coming to the Vietnamese. But the pressures of the war are hastening the process and allowing little time for the necessary social and cultural adaptation.

The war, a Vietnamese province chief decided in early 1964, dictated the construction of a large Montagnard resettlement area at Gia Bac. Its purpose was to group together several villages which could not defend themselves and make them into an entity of sufficient size to defend not only its people but also the main road on which it lay. Gia Bac was built in a dramatic location atop a ridge.

From it, one could see the South China Sea to the east and the Annamite mountain chain to the west. Gia Bac was to be a model settlement, enthusiastically supported both by the Vietnamese government and the American aid mission. A health clinic was built, along with a two-classroom school and a hamlet office. Wells were dug, and new clothes were distributed to the people. An all-out effort was made. An auspicious inauguration ceremony was planned, though organized as it was by Vietnamese, it bore scant relevance to the Montagnard traditions.

Warned in advance of the dignitaries' arrival by the whirring of helicopter rotors, the tribespeople were lined up neatly on either side of the dirt road along which reviewing stands had been set up for the inauguration ceremonies. Decked out in relief clothing, the people looked bewildered as the officials from the sky staggered through the clouds of dust billowed up by the chopper blades. Some of the lesser province officials had come by jeep, making a strenuous two-hour trip. All the provincial service chiefs had been ordered to attend this ceremony. Whereas the Americans were generally pleased to have a change from their desks and the confines of the town, these officials frequently took off the rest of the day or came to work late the next morning in order to compensate for the dangers and the unwelcome excitement. Once in Gia Bac they gathered in little groups and chatted or joked among themselves. The Montagnards stood as they were told, waiting to see what would happen. They understood little of the proceedings anyway, since the majority could not speak or understand the Vietnamese language. Two buffalo also waited, with ropes tied tightly around their heads and attached to ceremonial poles.

Such occasions, no matter how remote in the jungle wilderness, were invariably equipped by the Vietnamese Information Service with portable public-address systems. A long string of Vietnamese notables made speeches, after first testing the sound equipment by blowing and tapping on the microphone. One Montagnard man spoke briefly and was followed by a Catholic priest, the only Vietnamese there who could speak Koho, the appropriate Montagnard language for Gia Bac. If the villagers were still listening, they would have understood these two small parts of the speech-making. To be

sure, the buffalo sacrifice was a Montagnard custom, but the accompanying ritual of the Koho prancing around in a circle while blowing their six-piped mouth organs had the flavor of an unfamiliar and forced Vietnamese chorography. Because of the presence of the dignitaries and the late morning hour, the sacrifice, traditionally carried out at dawn in more elaborate form, was abbreviated. The legs of the huge animals were bound together with ropes which were then pulled, causing the buffalo to fall. Then their throats were slit, slowly enough so that the heaving of the suffering beasts and the stench of the fresh blood filled the air for more than a brief moment. Finally, the highest of the somewhat squeamish dignitaries were dabbed on the foot with the blood. Gia Bac was now "official."

After the ceremony, the public-address system was turned over to a blaring Vietnamese popular music band brought in from a Saigon nightclub. To its accompaniment, the guests were treated to a huge banquet. The people of Gia Bac, meanwhile, were free to go their own way. A group of small children headed for the community water hole a few hundred yards distant, farther than any of the visitors would be likely to venture. They had been on good behavior and looked spanking clean in their new clothes when the school was opened earlier. Now they were far more natural and uninhibited, scampering naked in and out of the water and splashing each other gleefully.

The future of Gia Bac would not be gleeful, however. The inauguration day was virtually the last on which security conditions permitted civilians to use the road. A few months later, with Viet Cong roving all about, the people left the settlement—some to refugee camps in the district towns, some to join the Viet Cong. This stage of their lives was without ceremony or fanfare. Gia Bac lies now abandoned, no longer a subject of pride to Vietnamese officials. It may never have been such to its own inhabitants.

Our own failure to understand both general conditions and the Montagnards was reflected in the fate of Minh Rong, another hamlet not far from Gia Bac. There had been a nice school at Minh Rong before, one of a very few constructed for the Montagnards

by the French. In recent years, however, it had fallen into disuse because the people were afraid to send their children outside the strategic hamlet fence and into an area, however nearby, where the Viet Cong might attack. Every time we drove through the tea plantations and bounced along the dirt trail past the school, we felt a sense of waste. No Viet Cong had been reported in the area for a long time, yet the school was being used as a shelter for cows. Its roof was falling in, and its cement floor was being torn up by hooves.

Why couldn't a teacher be hired and the school fixed up and used again for the children of Minh Rong? we asked provincial and district authorities.

"Impossible," we were told. "The people there are afraid of the VC."

One day, however, we went with the Montagnard assistant district chief and the provincial school inspector and talked with the leaders of Minh Rong hamlet. Conversation revealed that they weren't so much concerned about the VC as they were about a genie that haunted the school grounds and would be grossly offended if the school were used again. If they were to have a school, the leaders told us, it would have to be a new school in a new place. For if they tried to use the old one, the genie would bring evil fortune upon them. Indeed, they did not sound very interested in having a school. The Vietnamese school inspector, though basically a good and jovial person, seemed equally uninterested. A new school would only mean more paper work for him. An ensconced civil servant who occasionally admitted to a kind of revulsion for the "dirty Montagnards," he had no sense of the need for social revolution in the rural areas. He snickered at the tales of genies, turning his attention instead to a twirly homemade toy with which some of the ragged little Montagnard boys were playing in the dirt. Meanwhile, with the Montagnard district official, we made another try.

"While you're waiting for a possible new school," we asked the hamlet leaders, "could the old one be repaired and used temporarily?"

"Well, probably yes," they replied after some thought.

"For how long?"

"A few months."

"If the genie isn't offended by a few months, why would he be offended by a permanent school there?"

"He just would be. The children from all over would be trampling about and disturbing him. The genie would then bring sickness on the village people."

"But only the children from your village would use the school," we said hopefully, adding that we were already sponsoring another school for the next village. "Surely the genie would not be angry toward your children in Minh Rong?"

"Well," the leaders finally agreed, "perhaps not."

"Do you think it would be all right, then, to have the school reopen?" we asked.

"Yes, all right."

By now, the school inspector was whining about wanting to go back home. He didn't like being so far out of town, it was getting late in the afternoon, and besides, it looked like rain. He had not been with us earlier in Djiramour, a hamlet in the next district, and therefore he did not know the power of the genies. In Djiramour, the villagers had been forced by the local government to move all their houses for the second time, from the slopes of a hillside to the top of the same hill. The reason given was to permit better defense of the hamlet. One would have thought those people very angry at having to move again so soon after the initial settlement. Why had the government not thought to place them on top of the hill in the first place? One day we had asked them how they felt about all this, expecting a torrent of angry words. Instead, to our surprise, the village chief had replied, "The genie wanted us to move up here. He has not made anyone sick since we moved. This is a better spot. We are glad."

In Minh Rong, however, it would remain to be seen whether the genie would, in the end, approve or not. Meanwhile, we did our job. Since no one in Minh Rong knew how to repair with cement and no one knew how to read and write, both workers and a teacher had to be brought in from outside. Ideally, the teacher was chosen from among the hamlet population, since the natural spirit of community cooperation tended to make teacher and pupils more responsive to

one another. But this was not possible in Minh Rong. The district office finally designated K'Brop, a young boy from a nearby blanket-weaving hamlet, as the teacher. While K'Brop was being trained for two months, Vietnamese workers were sent in to repair the old school, to convert it from an institute for cows to an institute for basic learning. Ideally again, the Montagnards would learn to mix concrete by themselves and to help build their own school on a self-help basis. We had taught them elsewhere and found them industrious and quick to learn. But Vietnamese contractors could not afford the time and effort required to teach them. "How could they possibly learn anything?" shrieked one particularly arrogant Vietnamese district chief. "They are so ignorant! They are a prehistoric people!" When it was suggested to him that the first step toward overcoming their "ignorance" would be to build them schools, he laughed. "They don't care about such things," he said. "They want to be left alone." In the case of Minh Rong, it was considered more expedient to send Vietnamese workers to repair the school.

The school was repaired and K'Brop began teaching. But perhaps the genie had been annoyed, after all, for the school was never a success. Less than two months after it opened, the lock on the classroom door was broken and a number of books and CARE school kits were stolen. Soon after that, the Viet Cong, who had been absent from the area for some time, began terrorizing the countryside again. As a result, K'Brop did not dare to stay in Minh Rong, and it was not long before many of the hamlet people also left, seeking refuge in the provincial capital. Now the school at Minh Rong is once again unused, standing as a lonely sentinel in the midst of the tea plantations.

There were many reasons for the school's ineffectiveness. One was that the villagers did not really want it in the first place. We had been overzealous in our insistence. Only fourteen students enrolled, and as many as half were absent for long periods of time. While theoretically a small class should be more conducive to learning, in Viet Nam the feeling seems to be that a small turnout reflects an unworthwhile activity. Another problem had to do with K'Brop. To begin with, he was not a cheery person and his lack of spirit

influenced the classroom atmosphere. Not having advanced very far into primary school himself, he had understood little of the material presented at the short training course. And because the training program itself had been planned in Saigon, much of its content was irrelevant to Montagnard conditions. The point of the overly theoretical lessons, taught in Vietnamese, often escaped the new Montagnard teachers, who had only a rudimentary knowledge of the Vietnamese language. When questions were called for at the end of one fast-spoken lecture on teaching methods, a bewildered student asked, "Could we have more soap? We're all out of it." Until late 1964, Montagnard teachers, on returning to their classrooms, were obliged to conduct their classes entirely in Vietnamese. In practice, of course, they could not do this even if they spoke it well themselves, because their students wouldn't understand them. Still, despite all the difficulties, a beginning had been made, and even though some teachers did not perform as well as they might have under more favorable conditions, concepts of modern education were being introduced in villages that had never had schools before.

While the slipshod K'Brop was being trained as a teacher for Minh Rong, K'Xung, an alert Mnong, was being trained in Dalat. He had made the trip to Dalat, along with five of his colleagues, from the Da Mrong valley. A rutted trail, impassable even by jeep, wound over the mountains from Da Mrong to Dalat for a distance of some forty miles, and it was along this route that K'Xung had walked. The trip took a full two days on foot, and the brave young teachers spent the night in the forest. "Danger of Viet Cong? So what?" K'Xung said upon arrival.

K'Xung's qualifications for teaching were considerably better than those of K'Brop, even though his hanging earlobes, which are no longer common among the younger Montagnards, made him look more traditional. K'Xung had studied at a Catholic missionary school in Dalat, had completed primary school, and could communicate in basic French. He was conscientious and dedicated, as proven by his arduous trek through the forest, and he was extremely kind, as we were to learn later.

K'Xung's home was in Dien Krac, the most remote hamlet in the

Da Mrong area. To the people of Dien Krac the Americans must have seemed a strange, if generous, breed. After the teachers' training course, when K'Xung and his colleagues were loaded down with school supplies too heavy to carry for two days through the forests, a way had to be found to transport them home from Dalat. At the last minute, an understanding U.S. Army major offered a helicopter that had been consigned to him for "psychological warfare" the next afternoon. But there were two conditions to our using it. One was the weather, which turned out to be adequate. The other related to the "psywar" function of the mission, which the young teachers could fulfill by broadcasting propaganda to their fellow villagers while circling overhead before landing. Seeming scarcely surprised, K'Xung and the others agreed to this condition. They were, after all, ardently against the Viet Cong, and besides, retaliation by the guerrillas was unlikely since Da Mrong, for all its isolation, had been relatively free from the tensions of the war. Preparing for take-off from the little airfield in town, we must have made an unusual sight: from the airborne instrument of war dangled a huge bank of loudspeakers; they would have to be loud indeed to be heard over the din of the helicopter itself. Inside the helicopter, instead of weapons, ammunition, or leaflets, went blackboards and globes, schoolbooks, pencils and crayons, balls and visual aids, and myriad other tools for the classroom. The helicopter pilots had never visited Dien Krac before, so we would have to steer them through mountain passes and around cloud banks until the village came into view.

Only fifteen minutes later, instead of the two days it would have taken on foot, we crossed the last mountain barrier, and as the helicopter circled over Dien Krac swarms of villagers poured out from their thatch houses, craning their necks skyward. They were attracted not only by the now familiar whirring of the rotor blades, but by the announcements emitted through the hanging loudspeakers: "Hello! Hello! This is K'Xung, your teacher. I am returning home after a long two months in the city. The government has trained me to become a better teacher for our hamlet school and for our people. Our people will progress through education. All children prepare to study to read and to write. Now school will begin.

Hello! Hello! This is K'Xung. . . ." The villagers watched the helicopter as it hovered, preparing to land, and then they streamed outside the strategic hamlet gate to engulf K'Xung as he stepped from the craft with packages of all shapes and sizes. His task was just beginning.

To us, as outsiders, there was a sense of drama in all this—drama we had tried to evoke in the course of a short talk at the closing ceremony of the training sessions in Dalat. "This is not," we suggested, "a ceremony just to mark the closing of this course. Rather it is to celebrate the beginning of a new phase, a new step forward. For now you will be returning to your distant hamlets to teach your own village children. The most important task is just starting. As for us, your American friends, we have tried to help you somewhat in this training course. We hope in the coming weeks and months to be able to visit you in your classrooms in the hamlets. Meanwhile, we wish you much success, for yours is a great and noble undertaking." Understandably, it did not seem so great and noble to K'Xung, about to labor under the daily burdens of a teacher's life. But there he was, and when the helicopter took off and pattered back over the jagged mountain barrier to Dalat, Dien Krac was again isolated from the outside world.

Actually, the question of who was isolated from whom was a very subjective one. From the town, the hamlet was indeed isolated. On the other hand, no one was more provincial—particularly concerning the Montagnard villages—than the city dwellers. Because of the gap involved, school inspectors seldom visited such hamlets as Minh Rong and Dien Krac. By tradition, in fact, education was considered a phenomenon limited to the towns. The Vietnamese director of a district boarding school for Montagnards, though a fine and sensitive young man, had never seen a Montagnard hamlet until, at our initiative, he led some of his students on a singing tour of their home villages. This gesture was greatly appreciated by the children's parents, since it gave them an opportunity to see what their children had been doing while away at school. But even more important, the experience proved to be a major revelation to the school director, giving him his first view of his pupils' cultural backgrounds.

It is surely this lack of contact that has led to lack of understanding between the two ethnic groups. The great Independence Day parades held in Saigon on November 1 often feature a "Highlands delegation." Intended to titillate the urban Saigonese, this delegation is primitively and exotically dressed. Its members ride shaggy ponies along the broad boulevard of the parade route. Garbed in such a way even in their own villages, not to mention in the national capital, they would appear extremely out of place. But those Vietnamese who do not know the real Montagnard way of life cannot realize that they are being duped. Instead, they point and laugh.

Because the Montagnards are often thought to be primitive, anything better than what they already have is considered too good. One province chief was asked why the hamlet schools intended for Montagnards were of a different and inferior construction from those meant for Vietnamese. Why didn't the Montagnard schools have glass windows too? Why were the walls built only waist-high, leaving the rest open with only latticework up to the roof? Wouldn't it be very cold for the children in the early mornings? Wasn't aid money provided for equal-quality construction of all schools throughout the province, for Vietnamese and Montagnards alike?

"The Montagnards are more accustomed to the cold," the province chief replied.

We, as American volunteers uninfluenced by the traditional Vietnamese prejudices, felt compelled to treat the Montagnards better. But this too could cause problems, since it tended to emphasize the poor treatment they received at the hands of the Vietnamese. When we procured army-surplus leather briefcases for all the new teachers at the end of their training course, one young Montagnard offered us profuse thanks. "Before you came here the Vietnamese never gave us anything," he said. "They treated us very badly." From our point of view, the solution was not to treat the Montagnards well in order to make up for past injustices, but rather to bridge the gap in understanding between them and the Vietnamese with a view to future reconciliation. It was, after all, their country, and the two groups would have to learn to live in it together. General Vinh Loc, a former Vietnamese commander for the Highlands region, was

quite critical, however, of American encouragement to the Montagnards. Along with his subsequent replacement, General Lu Lan, he was the subject of a joke told in Vietnamese military circles: "Under General Loc the Montagnards were allowed to keep their loincloths. With Lu Lan, they will lose even those."

Certainly there has been improvement in the last few years. For one thing, the word "savage" has given way to the word "Montagnard" in everyday usage. When Lieutenant Colonel De was province chief in Dalat, he frequently sang duets with the Montagnard teachers: "Kinh Thuong Mot Nha"—Vietnamese and Montagnards share one home. Colonel De insisted at one point that all his civil servants begin to study the Koho language, and he proceeded to master it himself. He appeared genuinely to like and admire the Montagnards, and they liked him too. Late in 1964, after he failed to declare in time for General Khanh during an attempted *coup d'état* in Saigon, Colonel De was transferred to a coastal province. And although he was elected in 1967 as Dalat's representative to the Lower House in Saigon, he was no longer in a position to give much help to the Montagnard people.

Meanwhile, in a hamlet not too far from Dalat, Colonel De's replacement decided to prove to the Montagnard inhabitants that the government still cared for them. He ordered ten or twelve Vietnamese service chiefs to spend the night there. But the gesture was timed to coincide with an expected visit by Pham Khac Suu, then the Vietnamese chief of state, in order to impress him with the provincial administration's concern for the tribespeople. The Vietnamese were thus highly annoyed when the chief of state failed to appear, and they were left waiting forlornly and feeling quite out of place in the strange hamlet surroundings. They formed a clique of their own, effectively ignoring the Montagnards. Finally, to accommodate themselves overnight they made some of the Montagnards leave their homes, the eviction belying any gestures of friendship.

There were other exceptional Vietnamese, however, besides Colonel De. One group of action-minded students spent a full month in a muddy Montagnard refugee settlement, helping the uprooted tribespeople to build new homes. Some Vietnamese were associated with the foreign missionaries in converting the animist

Montagnards to Christianity. In spite of the missionaries' sometimes self-righteous competition with one another for the allegiance of various villages, their contributions to the physical well-being of the people were often considerable. Although some Montagnards were unimpressed by all "Yuan," as they called the Vietnamese, and thought of them as being lazy, weak, and arrogant, many could indeed distinguish between the good and the bad Vietnamese.

Miss Tu, the provincial school inspectress in Dalat, was widely considered to be a good Vietnamese. She had a friendly smile for everyone and, in spite of being a woman, was one of the few civil servants who seemed to enjoy visiting the people in their hamlets. Her colleagues in the education office, all good people in themselves, seemed to permit her this strange predisposition in favor of the Montagnards, though never fully understanding it or sharing it. They would pay lip service to the desirability of helping all the rural people, but when it came to bouncing around on wilderness trips to see them, they were either too busy, too fearful of their lives, or didn't feel very well that day. Miss Tu, putting the men in her office to shame, was always willing to set out at the crack of dawn and often stayed out until dusk. She never complained. She was particularly friendly to the Montagnards, and it was a rude awakening for them when, like Colonel De and so many effective civil servants, she was abruptly transferred in 1967 to a job in Dalat City, leaving the problems of the countryside to two old men who rarely left their desks and never visited hamlet schools. "The situation is very bad now," Miss Tu wrote to us recently. "The teachers become lazy, because nobody comes to see them. I met K'Xung and some other teachers, our mutual friends, who came to see me when they went to the education office to get their salaries. Now, nobody comes to give them money like we did before, so they must go by foot to get it themselves every three or four months."

She knew K'Xung well. She had helped him, and he would help her. On one visit we took CARE school kits, soap, student chalkboards, wall decorations, maps, a ball, and hair clippers to his village of Dien Krac. The helicopter, as usual, dropped us off outside the village entrance. (The first time, it had landed inside the village, but the rotor blades threatened to blow the thatch roofs off the houses.

Thereafter, we always discouraged the pilots from landing too close.) A throng of children came to greet us and helped carry the supplies to the schoolhouse. The helicopter then flew off for other supply missions, the pilots promising to return for us at two-thirty that afternoon. While making visits by helicopter certainly afforded great ease of transportation, there was always an element of uncertainty. Sometimes we barely had time to complete our business before it returned, and always we had to keep an ear cocked for the sound of the rotors so as to be at the landing spot exactly when it descended. Although army officers occasionally used it to make weekend pleasure trips, we were advised to respect the time of the helicopter, since it allegedly cost at least \$200 an hour to run the flying wonder.

This time we would not have to rush our visit. We watched while K'Xung locked the things we had brought in the school cabinet for safekeeping. The soap was especially precious because all we could obtain was expensive shampoo, donated by an American firm. Cheap bar soap would have been better, but it had not been budgeted locally and so we had no means for buying it. The Montagnards stood in awe, however, of our affluent and foamy green suds. Then we helped K'Xung hang some of the decorations on the wall, along with maps of Viet Nam which we had procured free of charge through a kindly officer at the National Geographic Service. Miss Tu used the maps to assist K'Xung in giving the pupils a spontaneous geography lesson. Names they may or may not have heard before, like Saigon or Dalat or Ban Me Thuot, were related to points on the map on the wall. K'Xung's globe, made at the training course but in most classrooms destined through lack of use to remain a mere ornament, helped to explain the origin of the different-looking Americans. The fifty pupils, dressed virtually in rags, did not appear visibly impressed.

Not wishing to cause an added burden, we had brought along our own sandwiches for lunch. K'Xung offered us rice wine to wash them down with, though Miss Tu declined, Vietnamese women normally confining themselves to tea and soft drinks. K'Xung, however, spoke highly of the rice-wine custom as we sipped the cheering liquid through a tube enmired in the depths of the tall heirloom

jar. "Oh, we drink it often," he said, "especially when we have guests." Indeed, it is a sociable pastime, within the family as well as during festivals and funerals. The oldest woman in the household usually takes her place before the jar and sips first, the society being matrilineal. She then cedes to the guest and finally to the other members of the family in turn. One man is designated to keep up the water level in the jar. With a metal cup, he takes fresh water brought directly from the river or well and adds it to the rice mash which has been fermenting in the bottom of the jar for up to one month. This pastime is frowned on by the Protestant missionaries, but it is not interfered with by the Catholics. As K'Xung put it with a grin, "It's quite all right for us Catholics to drink rice wine. It is only the *Protestants* who protest!"

At two-thirty, the helicopter was not yet in sight. We waited. K'Xung, meanwhile, gave the children the ball to play with, and they found this much more exciting than the geography lesson. As they kicked it about the open area in the center of the hamlet, we scanned the skies. But when the monsoon clouds floated over the mountains, followed by the daily torrential rains, we began to believe that we would end up spending the night, for helicopters did not fly in bad weather. By the time the rain had finished clattering onto the metal roof of the school and pouring into a barrel set up at one end, the afternoon was drawing to a close. We concluded for sure that we would be spending the night. While Miss Tu sat alone on the veranda and got used to the idea (before that day, even she had never been inside a Montagnard longhouse), a soldier across the way played the *kamboat*, a six-piped mouth organ. Though most foreigners (including the ethnic Vietnamese) found the music monotonous and simple, the instrument turned out to be a difficult one to play.

Although Dien Krac itself was little affected by the war, it was highly unusual for an American, or a Vietnamese from the city, to dare spend a night in the village. Furthermore, Miss Tu was concerned that her family would worry about her safety, which they certainly did. Never having been there themselves, of course, they naturally conjured up the most grotesque images of a frontier post peopled by savages. At five-thirty we asked if the military two-way

radio could be used to call Dalat in an effort to determine whether we'd been forgotten. Every hamlet has a two-way radio for use in case of Viet Cong attack, yet we were told that the only times it could be heard at the other end was at 6:00 P.M. and at 6:00 A.M., the monitoring times at Da Mrong post. Half an hour later, the soldiers tried to radio in, but since all the other hamlets were calling at the same time, Dien Krac had to await its turn. By the time the operator finally got through, the Da Mrong monitor had been turned off, not to be heard again until six the next morning! One could not help wondering about the system's efficacy in case of attack, though possibly the sound of gunshots would have carried the three miles along the valley floor even without the radio.

With embarrassed apologies for the primitiveness of the dinner available, K'Xung offered us a more than adequate amount of red rice, along with some river fish and tea. Then, as darkness fell on the hamlet, he and the village chief found blankets, suggesting some of them for use underneath us in order to make the woven bamboo sleeping platform softer. K'Xung's whole extended family slept raised above the dirt floor on the same long bamboo platform in the single long room of the Mnong-style longhouse. The only other furniture, aside from a crude table and some chairs, was a smaller platform which hung from the center roof pole and served as a granary. The valuable heirloom vases that were used for the rice wine were lined up along one wall.

In addition to blankets, K'Xung produced two mosquito nets, perhaps the only two in the hamlet. But they were scarcely needed, we discovered, because the indoor cooking fires were allowed to smolder throughout the night; the suffocating smoke they produced tended to discourage all insects. Finally, the soothing sounds of the village lulled us to sleep, as occasional low murmurs and muffled coughings from the other huts mixed with the loud calls of the denizens of the forest around us.

The next morning, the radio operator reported having made contact with Da Mrong at six, but added that Da Mrong had claimed it did not know how to contact Dalat. Its line reached only to Lac Duong, the district headquarters. After a cursory washing, and over more rice and fish offered by K'Xung, we decided the only way to

clarify our situation was to walk to Da Mrong. For this it was fortunate that Miss Tu, before undertaking the helicopter trip the previous day, had changed her high-heeled shoes and *ao dai** for sneakers and slacks. K'Xung, leaving his not-too-saddened class to the pleasures of the new ball, accompanied us. By then the sky was blue and the sun bright, and the valley was a luscious sight with its towering green peaks on either side. We could hear children shouting from afar in the golden rice fields. These were children who could not go to school, for it was their job to scare away the birds that threatened to eat the precious ripening grains.

In Da Mrong, word had just been received that the helicopter would come. It was being repaired from a breakdown the day before. Although hot and perspiring from the relentless sun, we decided in the meantime to walk on to see Ha Jah, a teacher at the nearby hamlet of Yengle who seemed to appreciate our periodic encouragement. Being an easygoing fellow, Ha Jah had difficulty keeping discipline in his class of eighty-five pupils. Every setback—even so minor a one as the soccer ball's wearing out—was discouraging to him. This time, as it happened, Ha Jah's pupils were off burying a small classmate who had died from sickness the day before. Still Ha Jah persevered at his job. Finally, when the sun was already high, the unmistakable sound of rotor blades could be heard, and the helicopter descended first at Dien Krac, to learn we'd gone to Da Mrong, then at Da Mrong, to hear we'd proceeded to Yengle. Responding to our waving of handkerchiefs in front of Yengle's stockade fence, the helicopter touched down. We bade farewell to both Ha Jah and K'Xung and climbed aboard.

Inside the chopper were four Americans, annoyed that we had not stayed to await them at Dien Krac but had caused them to take several expensive minutes to trace us to Yengle. "What's the big idea?" one of them asked. "We got up early this morning. We have to get back to our base. This picking you up was only a favor. We just about decided to leave you right where you were." Miss Tu smiled wanly.

It was always encouraging to visit Dien Krac and the other schools in the Da Mrong valley, for in spite of their remoteness and

* The *ao dai* is the traditional Vietnamese women's dress.

the difficulties of transportation, they were among the best-run schools and they attracted the largest numbers of children to class. It seemed that aside from the differing attitudes toward education on the part of various parents within a given community, different communities also displayed varying collective appreciations for a school in their midst. The Da Mrong villages were highly appreciative, thus the crowded classrooms and conscientious teachers. The attitude in Minh Rong, by contrast, was not favorable and enrollment was low.

In working with Montagnard villagers, as well as with Vietnamese, it was important to be able to recognize the moods and attitudes of the community and of the leaders within the community. It was easy to make mistakes. On an initial investigating visit to one isolated hamlet with the Montagnard deputy province chief, we received the impression that a school was not desired by the people there. The inhabitants we met showed no interest. We consequently proposed that a planned classroom should be placed elsewhere. Several months later, the people of that hamlet opened their own school in a new wooden building with crude, though adequate, furniture. They had selected their own teacher from among the local population, and he had begun lessons for more than thirty children. Such efforts at self-help were all the more impressive for their rarity. More often, luring Montagnard children to school was very difficult, as it had been at Minh Rong. This was hardly surprising, for having only recently moved out of the forests into the fortified settlements, parents frequently did not know the meaning of education and had no clear idea of what a school really was. It was difficult to persuade them that a better life lay in store for them if they would send their children to school, rather than keeping them at home to help in the household and to guard the buffalo or chase away the birds that threatened the rice. Often a family would designate one child, the smartest of the brood, to attend school by way of token representation. In some schools, only boys attended. "Oh, is school for girls too?" asked one teacher.

The romanticists among us questioned the need for urging these contented children of nature to attend school and thus to succumb to modern life and its inherent woes. The overriding reason given was that education was critical to the war effort. Schools, according

to this line, represented the winning of hearts and minds, and the conquest of ignorance implied that educated people would never choose communism. Of course, the counterinsurgency motivation was not the only one, though it was the one that gave impetus to school construction and teacher training programs. It was also seen that general economic development, which was after all the need of the times, could only be based on a literate population and the ability to link cause with effect—fertilizer with larger crops, sanitation with better health, and ability to read and reason with participatory democracy. Of special significance to the Montagnards was the need to catch up with their Vietnamese compatriots, so that they would not be cheated in the market place or discriminated against because of inferior opportunity to advance. Among Montagnard nationalists, this last reason had a special appeal and helps to explain why their leaders were often very willing to cooperate in modernization programs for their people.

Much has been done for the Montagnards. In a sense, it was the pressures of the war that both led to their problems and opened up solutions to them. It was the pressures of the war that brought them into frequent contact with the Vietnamese who looked down upon them. But this same contact over the years has begun to bring them together in a limited bond of understanding. Six years ago Vietnamese would have denied any similarity between the way they looked upon the Montagnards and the plight of the black people in America. Now, at least, the problems of the Montagnards are recognized. Increasing numbers have been absorbed into the government, and a few have even learned the techniques of bureaucratic corruption. In some areas Montagnard high-school enrollments tripled between 1965 and 1967, thanks in part to American scholarships. Montagnard pupils are given handicaps on the competitive government examinations for diplomas. A majority of children have for the first time been able to attend primary schools either in or near their villages, although many of these have been ravaged by war soon after opening. Each Highland province now has an agricultural training center where new seeds and animals are furnished and new methods of farming and home economics are taught. In national government, a previously insignificant Commissariat for Montag-

nard Affairs has been elevated to the ministry level, and a proportionate number of Montagnard representatives serve in the Saigon Legislature, their place assured by the Constitution. More Montagnard military units have been placed under the command of Montagnard officers.

Yet many continue to dream hopefully of a separate Montagnard nation. These nationalists feel uncomfortable in any association with the Vietnamese government, and a handful (predominantly from the educated elite) continue to hold out in the mountainous border regions against any form of Vietnamese hegemony. They look skeptically upon government attempts to mollify them. When in 1967 a Montagnard lieutenant colonel was appointed province chief in Pleiku, a move intended to please the Montagnards, they reacted by taking offense at the government's choice of a man lacking in administrative experience: "This is ridiculous! This man is ignorant; he does not know how to read or write! To call him chief of province is to demonstrate to what an extent the Vietnamese make fun of us. The government appoints this so-called lieutenant colonel just to better oppress us and to laugh in the nose of all the Montagnards." That same year, one of the most educated and reasonable Montagnards reacted to the news of a mysterious poisoning of his people: "This recent news concerning the relations between Vietnamese and Montagnards disturbs me. I have just heard the very bad and shocking news that 140 Montagnards have died, poisoned by alcohol and dried fish—30 in Djiring and 110 in Ban Me Thuot. I believe that we are going to disappear little by little. I am afraid of that. I don't know why they did it. I'm afraid this will create another tension between the two races. I know very well that to live in peace it is better to be friends than enemies; but this time events have exceeded their proper bounds. You see, the weak are always in the wrong. Thus, it seems, might makes right." The causes of the poisoning were never proved, but the Montagnards did not care; they blamed the Vietnamese.

The problems of reconciling embittered ethnic groups have never been easy. In North Viet Nam, it is believed, separation was relatively complete, since the Montagnards there were granted nearly autonomous status on their own lands. Those Vietnamese adminis-

trators who did work there were apparently required to learn the Highland tongues and to treat the tribespeople as equals, or even as "comrades." Montagnards in the North were appointed to high positions, especially in the military. To be sure, some of the North Vietnamese tribal societies are considered more advanced and sophisticated than those of the South, thus facilitating equality and cooperation. On the other hand, rumors during the period of American bombings and the outpouring of Vietnamese into Montagnard areas have suggested that relations in the North may have become more tense anyway.

For the Montagnards of the South, life will never again be the same. The old generation that longed to return to the life of slash-and-burn is dying. Among the young generation, some have been integrated into the Vietnamese world and others will be. But the majority, represented by men like Y Bli, are caught in the middle, unable to return to the old ways, yet frightened before the specter of the new. Their eyes have been opened to promise for the future, but their darker skins, their imperfect accent in speaking Vietnamese, and the weight of discrimination have left them with feelings of inferiority. Finding for themselves satisfying roles in the larger society will take time and understanding. Like all peoples struggling for identity, they are tormented and confused.

Americans have greatly influenced the slow emancipation of the Montagnards. Without them, it might not have come about. But it was never really fair for Americans, of all people, to criticize Vietnamese for their bigotry toward the tribespeople. The racial problems of the United States have not escaped notice in Viet Nam, and one sensitive Montagnard turned down the offer of a study trip to America. "I am afraid I would not be regarded well by the American people," he said. What Americans in Viet Nam could and did do, however, was to set an example of concern for these people so that some of the racist, or just plain nonthinking, Vietnamese would see the Montagnards as fellow citizens. Miss Tu is pleased with the progress she has seen in her country: "It was right when you compared the situation of American Negroes with the situation of the Montagnards. But now, I remark that the situation of the Montag-

nards is better. They occupy some important places in society. Most of them are very emancipated. But there is still one problem," she adds. "They keep their inferiority complexes." For the Montagnards, the struggle will continue long after the war.

[5]

HUMAN FRAILTIES

Red Tape, Corruption, and Lethargy

Some five miles up the coast from the seaside resort of Nha Trang is the village of Cat Loi. In 1964, Cat Loi was to receive a school from the government. The villagers were enthusiastic about the prospect of a new school, and it was the first time the government had ever sponsored one for them. When Gene, the IVS volunteer working in the province, visited there, the people proudly showed him a freshly painted hamlet office which they had just built for themselves. Then they told him of their plans for helping to construct the school. They were prepared to do this on a self-help basis and had further proved their enthusiasm by selecting one of the hamlet's budding young intellectuals to attend a provincial teacher training course.

The villagers' high hopes for the school were not matched by government action, however. There were repeated delays until its construction was finally begun. In spite of the people's desires, and contrary to their expectations, it turned out not to be a self-help project at all. The government had hired a contractor to build all the schools in the district and had given him a certain amount of roofing, cement, and money to complete the job.

On one visit after work had finally started, Gene found the villagers deeply disturbed. The contractor's workers were laying out the foundation and making cement blocks for the building, but the villagers complained that they were using too little cement in the mixture. They feared that the structure would not be strong. A week later the walls were up and already crumbling. "The contractor uses only part of the cement which you Americans have given

for the school," the people complained. "He sells the rest. He gives the money to the government officials who gave him the contract. Because they are crooked our hamlet will have a poor school."

Gene dutifully reported this reaction to the education officials in the provincial city of Nha Trang, but they replied that they couldn't do anything about it because the contractor was a friend of the province chief and the district chief. The American AID representative said that he had already taken the matter up with the province chief and could not bother him with it again for a while. Gene then went to talk with the contractor and was immediately invited to dinner at one of Nha Trang's finest restaurants to discuss the issue. At the dinner, the contractor promised to do a better job and gave assurances that the bad work was due simply to an oversight on the part of his foreman. After the contractor paid the restaurant bill, they agreed to meet at the district chief's house the next week to discuss the situation further. Meanwhile work had stopped on the school, and rain began to wear away at the thin cement walls. The villagers continued to complain and said that since the Americans were paying for the school they should have the power to do something about it.

The visit with the contractor at the district chief's house was short and theatrical. It consisted of a pointed reprimand given by the district chief to the contractor in order to demonstrate the good intentions of the district chief and to protect everyone's ego. After the scolding, the contractor left the room and the district chief followed him out to have a few private words with him. Then the district chief returned and said that "everything has been taken care of."

In Cat Loi, work resumed a month later. Many of the walls had to be rebuilt because children playing in the area had pushed them over. The villagers said again and again what a bad job the government always did. When the school was finally finished, Gene asked the villagers whether he could walk on the floor. "Be careful," they warned. "The cement is only half an inch thick." Feeling they might be exaggerating, Gene stomped on the floor. The cement crumbled under his weight. When he bumped against the wall, cement fell from it to the floor. The villagers asked how such a

building could ever stand up to daily use by the pupils. They pointed again to the much sturdier hanlet office that they had built themselves. Before school opened, the villagers had to raise money on their own and repair the walls and floor in the new school so that classes could be held at all.

When Vietnamese list their criticisms of the Saigon government, corruption is universally mentioned as the leading factor undermining confidence in the regime. Government officials and contractors frequently work together in construction jobs where they skimp on materials and the quality of their work and then divide the amount saved off the American grant. Yet there are other methods of corruption too. Destitute refugees often complain of having to pay about \$5.00 for identification papers, without which they would be arrested as Viet Cong. The sister of a close Vietnamese friend was told by a Vietnamese employee in the U.S. Embassy personnel office that she would have to pay \$50.00 for the processing of her papers so that she could get a job more quickly. Another girl told of her sister's recent departure for Thailand with an American soldier; in itemizing the amount she had to pay for her exit visa, the bribe given to the bureaucrats involved was but a matter-of-fact part of the whole cost.

On very rare occasions, and mostly as symbolic gestures to placate critics—especially the Americans—corrupt administrators are removed from their posts. In late 1967, for example, there was a thorough shake-up in Binh Dinh province. The U.S. Embassy was ecstatic—until one of the very worst offenders, the refugee-service chief, turned up in an equally high position in another province farther north. Administrators with enough influence to get good jobs in the first place and then to last in these remunerative positions also seem to have enough influence to save their necks even if they are finally caught. Some flagrant cases may be brought to court, but our Vietnamese associates have been quick to point out that these usually involve only relatively minor officials. To take on the worst offenders, they add, would be politically impossible, since it would affect the highest ruling echelons—if not the ruling men, then at least their wives, who sometimes act as a “cover.”

One district-chief friend suggested that a certain level of corruption can exist even while the government is responsive to the people at large. "Of course I steal from the government," he said without apology, "but I try to do my job well, to work hard when I work, and then to play hard when I have finished the work. As for my corruption, I try to do it intelligently, and I tell all my subordinates to do the same. I tell them they can take a little here and there, but not too much. That's as good as anyone can expect." He was, in fact, a very competent and efficient district chief.

In 1968, and in spite of visible government efforts to root out corruption, Prime Minister Tran Van Huong admitted that it could never be entirely eliminated. For some, it seems necessary for survival under difficult wartime circumstances. With such a large percentage of the country's male population in the armed forces or the civilian government, relatives at various levels have found ways in which they can help and enrich each other, even though these ways may not be considered ethical in the West. Corruption in the best interests of supporting one's own family, in fact, is not only excusable, but even morally right in the family-oriented Vietnamese society. We found an example of this attitude in a letter from General Nguyen Huu Co, one of the biggest profiteers in all South Viet Nam. Having held the various positions of corps commander, minister of defense, and deputy prime minister, he is known to have fired at least one province chief because the latter refused to give Co's wife a large piece of property in his province. Finally Co himself was ousted from the country and sought exile in Hong Kong. Writing from there to a former colleague in 1967, he explained his position:

My family of 12 children is now fine. My oldest child, nineteen years old, passed the first exam and is still studying at Lycée Yersin, Dalat. The other children are also in school and I don't have to worry much about my family. Luckily, while General Khanh [the former prime minister] hated me, I took my cue and constructed a house in Nha Trang on government land which the Americans rent for three million [piasters] per year. After annual taxes and maintenance, I still have half that for myself, enough to raise my 12 children. If it weren't for that,

I don't know what I would do for a living. In our career as generals, and once we are turned to pasture, it is very difficult to change profession.

The removal of corrupt officials does not necessarily bring about an amelioration of the original conditions. The refugee-service chief who was ousted from Binh Dinh province, for example, was replaced by a competent man, but American AID officers pointed out that the honest replacement was so afraid of making a mistake himself that he hardly dared act at all. Provincial programs were thus stymied because no one would take responsibility, fearing a new accusation of corruption if something were done wrong. Another exceedingly honest civil servant felt responsible for three pit-privies that pupils had dug and constructed at their boarding school. Since government funds and materials had been used, the education administrator refused permission for the privies' use until the province chief himself approved it. Broaching the matter to the province chief proved delicate and embarrassing, and the lesser official refused to act on his own. Finally, the pupils' urgent need of the facilities pressed us to resolve the issue by interceding with the province chief ourselves.

Another education official was relegated to the out-of-the-way Highlands province of Lam Dong after being accused of corruption in his previous job on the coast. In this case, however, the administrator showed more than reluctance to commit himself because of fears of new corruption charges. He also manifested a supreme disdain and indifference toward the job itself and the everyday problems he should have been solving. His attitude resulted in a particularly mediocre training course for hamlet teachers, and very nearly resulted in out-of-town participants' having no place to sleep or eat because he did not feel like making the necessary arrangements. Worst of all, the province chief, equally disturbed over the man's hostility toward his job, could not oust him because of the latter's "highly placed friends in the Saigon ministry."

If Vietnamese are disgusted with the corruption and nepotism exhibited by many of their government officials, they are often quick to add that Americans too are guilty. Saigon's *Cong Chung* newspaper charged in March, 1968, that "American aid is entirely

responsible for the current corruption in Viet Nam," adding that this was one of the reasons why "Americans have earned more enmity than sympathy from the Vietnamese people." Others, like the Saigon *Daily News* columnist Van Minh, were less harsh on the American role, placing the onus instead on "the irresistible impact of the American way of life" on Vietnamese society and noting that it is difficult for Vietnamese to resist the many opportunities for corruption caused by the Americans' tempting display of riches:

Vietnamese civil servants, who have been the hardest hit by the current inflation, are not expected to watch this mad scramble for the U.S. dollar with equanimity and detachment. Being human, they are most likely to resort to corruption or moonlighting, not only to cope with their financial difficulties, but also, and sometimes mostly, to be financially in the swim with other people. For one's inability to make as much money as one's equals, according to psychologists, is a forceful cause for an inferiority complex.

Americans participate even more directly in illegal practices. The most common is exchanging money on the black market, for which some Vietnamese criticize not only U.S. government personnel and private contractors, but also the very journalists who publicly accuse the Vietnamese of corruption. There are more enterprising Americans, too, and Van Minh described their roles as follows:

Saigon and other cities have been flooded with stolen PX goods. It is logically assumed that the goods have been stolen by Vietnamese. But I wonder if any Vietnamese, however cunning and resourceful they may be, could afford to steal so many goods as to regularly feed the innumerable open black markets without the connivance of Americans themselves. How could Vietnamese alone, say, steal tons upon tons of steel bars from the American military installations along the Bien Hoa highway which are guarded only by Americans? How could Vietnamese alone get huge cases across so many checkpoints manned by none other than Americans? It is a well-known fact that some American guards at U.S. warehouses often come to a curious deal with Vietnamese crooks. In exchange for a certain amount of money or for some cute girls, those guards agree to let the crooks have absolute freedom to steal anything. . . .

"Of course, I never expect the Americans to be morally better than the Vietnamese or any other people," Van Minh concluded. "We, Americans and Vietnamese alike, are human beings and share the same capital of human frailties."

Government responsiveness on the local level is seriously affected not only by corruption, but also by more directly political considerations. Competent administrators, it seems, are continually transferred because their competence is seen as a threat to those around them or because they have supported the wrong side in this or that *coup d'état* or because they lack the right friend at the right place in the hierarchy. One very kind and sophisticated gentleman who had been chief of primary education in Ban Me Thuot in 1963 was transferred to Hue in 1965. According to his version of the story, he had been in his new post only three or four days when antigovernment riots broke out in the city. The education chief went out to some of the schools and tried to keep them functioning in spite of the disturbances. His move was interpreted, however, as a "counterrevolutionary gesture," and the wrath of the demonstrators then turned upon him. "Kill him, kill him," they apparently shouted. In the end, they only beat him, after which he managed to escape south to Phan Thiet. When things quieted down again in Hue, he asked to return there. The request was granted, but since he was still considered a controversial figure, he was placed in an office without any job. The last time we saw him (he has since been transferred again), he was spending the day sitting at a vacant desk with nothing to do except talk to the new, but only temporary, education chief, who was himself fervently hoping to be sent elsewhere. There were too many political problems for them to work effectively in Hue, they both said. Meanwhile, the only progress made in education was the stamping and signing of the most routine paperwork.

The bureaucracy, through little fault of its own, is ill-suited and untrained for the task of carrying out the various new development programs, which are intended primarily to show the government's responsiveness vis-à-vis the NLF. The task, of course, is a supremely demanding one—in these difficult and competitive times it would require no less than a revolutionary approach to problems, particu-

larly in the rural areas. It would mean that government cadres, like their counterparts in the NLF, would have to become much closer to the people. Like NLF cadres, they would have to assist old widows in harvesting their crops or in carrying water, to give poor peasants needed rice, and generally to show an interest in the people's problems. But very few government bureaucrats can do these things. They were trained in the French civil service techniques of shuffling sheaves of papers, and they are very uncomfortable among and condescending toward the rural people. As family-oriented individuals, these officials cannot readily comprehend the idea of philanthropy on a larger social scale. As security has become a more sensitive issue, of course, the problem has grown even more serious, for government civil servants with family responsibilities feel that they cannot afford the risks the job demands. Since their isolation in the provincial or district towns keeps most of them from having any up-to-date idea of security conditions in the countryside, however, fear of the Viet Cong often serves more as a pretext than as a legitimate constraint.

One of our primary roles as volunteers, as it turned out, was to act as catalysts in urging Vietnamese administrators to do their jobs. Agricultural extension agents would whine that they didn't have enough gasoline to take their jeeps far out of town, though they often seemed to have enough for the service chief to drive around town on his personal errands. School inspectors would ask in all honesty, "What's the sense in going out there? There's nothing to do." But the fact was that their visits, if sincere and constructive, could do much to buoy the morale of rural workers who felt, usually with justification, that no one outside cared about them or whether they worked or not. The statistics that urban administrators spent hours and reams of paper compiling were absolutely meaningless because no one had ever been to the area concerned to see for himself what was really going on.

The management of the self-help program was an example of this lack of communication between rural and urban areas. According to the program's theory, the people of each hamlet would decide what their community needed most. They would then submit a request through their village headquarters and then through district and on

up to province levels for any necessary construction materials, food commodities, or a certain minimum of cash, at first limited to about \$200 per project. At the same time, the people were responsible for providing the labor themselves, thus the principle of self-help. On paper, this was an excellent program: it offered government assistance without making the people overly dependent on such aid, and it urged democratic community action on the part of the hamlet people in determining their own local priorities.

In practice, however, villagers found it difficult to distinguish between the various government offices and to know which one to approach. They got discouraged when they were sent from one narrowly defined service to another. Furthermore, the transmission of documentation through all the layers of bureaucracy could delay implementation by a full year or longer, so that we often found ourselves being begged by the villagers to give the assistance directly. But we could not in good faith do this, because another aspect of the program was to develop the government's responsiveness by having it handle everything. In the end, not only did projects often fail to materialize, but the government machinery showed even more evidence of its inability to respond. Equally bad, in some districts local administrators decided for themselves what the hamlet people wanted. It was certainly easier for them than going out to the hamlet to explain the program and then wait while the hamlet people made up their minds. In one such district, we suspected something was amiss when every village in the entire district requested the purchase of water buffalo. When we went out ourselves and talked with the people, it turned out they knew nothing of any such request or of any such program, and most of them asked for something like a well or a school instead. The district officials, when confronted with this discovery, merely noted that "buffaloes would have been better for them."

In more recent years, as American aid flooded in, harried Vietnamese administrators were often at a loss where to put it all. Fertilizers and improved pig and chicken breeds usually were lavished on nearby villages where transportation was easiest. Schools were assigned to hamlets at random, usually in response to the district chief's suggestion, even though investigation of these selections in

one province revealed that 75 per cent of the locations either had a school already or else showed scant interest in having one. Meanwhile, other localities in the same province were crying out for such assistance, having gone so far as to recruit their own teachers and to open schools in the most humble available shacks.

In another province, the hamlets had been blanketed with so-called information halls. These were listed as self-help projects in many cases, though in reality they fulfilled the function of the government's generally irrelevant information service. Their doors were always locked, since the building was for information-service use only, and their cadres almost never appeared in the distant hamlets. Meanwhile, the education service had plans to construct elaborate new schools in the same localities—until we suggested using the information buildings as schools and thus saving money. The problem here was not only that the government services had little contact with the villages, but that these services had little contact with each other. It became part of our job to coordinate the projects of the information and education service chiefs in this case. Finally, the information halls, with the addition of furniture, were opened and “doubled” as schools.

For us, particularly in the early years, the hazards and roadblocks of government corruption and bureaucracy were far more aggravating than Viet Cong terrorism. For the rural Vietnamese we were trying to help, on the other hand, there was nothing new in government unresponsiveness. Naturally, they complained about it—often bitterly—but when promises were made to rural people they knew from experience not to take them very seriously. Even in years of relative peace, such as 1958, government workers at the agricultural experiment station in Ban Me Thuot were going for months without their salaries—even though they were entitled to only fifty cents a day. In 1963 and 1964, rural health-workers and schoolteachers went without salaries for up to a full year. It was surprising that any of them bothered to keep working, though some of course did not. For us it was sometimes both easier and more humanitarian to lend small amounts of our own money to particularly hard-hit worker friends in our provinces. When we sometimes made a point of keeping a promise, the people were surprised; it had never happened before.

Bitterly frustrated, those of us working in the provinces would search for scapegoats, and it was usually the bureaucrats in the Saigon ministries whom we blamed. Certainly we knew that all bureaucracies are cumbersome, slow, and full of red tape, and that of the American Mission in Saigon was no exception. Yet the one the French bequeathed to the Vietnamese was especially slow. When corruption and the reluctance of petty administrators to make decisions were added to this, it was perhaps no wonder that nothing happened. We were even more frustrated, in fact, when we occasionally met some of our scapegoats in Saigon and found that they were nice people. Politely and patiently, they would look up from their piles of papers and dossiers to assist us. Yet it seldom did any good to appeal to them. Either they knew nothing of the problem, or else they indicated that the province or district had not sent in the necessary papers. Sometimes they suggested that the crucial file must have been delayed somewhere else along the line, perhaps in one of the piles on one of the desks of one of the other friendly and patient bureaucrats. Their job was not a particularly pleasant one, though many of them had given large bribes for the privilege of working in Saigon. When told that rural workers had not been paid for months, their response was invariably, "I'm sorry, but we don't have the necessary papers here." It often seemed as though every slight transaction required ten carbon copies, each of which had to be stamped at least once and often twice or three times, and then laboriously signed and countersigned in some unreadable signatures.

If the bureaucrats did not seem as concerned about the problems in the field as we thought they should have been, they always said it was not their fault. After all, they too had problems, many of which, in the final analysis, concerned the larger political context. And so it was that we were led into a vicious circle where nobody was at fault more than anyone else. The whole nasty situation, it seemed, was to blame. And that was the problem of Viet Nam.

[6]

DEFENDING THE INTERESTS OF THE BELIEVERS

Catholics, Buddhists, and the Struggle Movement

"Ap buc, ap buc," we repeated, thumbing through the dictionary to see what the monk's words meant in English. It was August, 1963, and he had been using the word with increasing frequency during the Vietnamese-English language lessons we had been exchanging. "Ah, here it is—'oppression.'" The monk looked at us benignly. "Yes," he said softly, "oppression." We smiled in the satisfaction of having learned a new word.

It seemed an appropriate word, for upon entering the pagoda grounds that afternoon we had been startled to note that there were soldiers everywhere. At first we had been afraid to enter, thinking we would be stopped by the guards. But though they looked at us with some suspicion, we rode in freely on our bicycles. The monk, after all, expected us, as he did every afternoon, and we did not want to let him down. We had first come to know him upon hearing of his desire to learn English. Then, as principal of the Buddhist high school next to the pagoda, he had also asked us on occasion to teach pronunciation to his students. In return, he helped us with our Vietnamese. He was only twenty-four years old, but he seemed older and wiser.

Greeting us at the door to his quiet cell, he invited us in. Some of the other monks with shaved heads and dressed in the same gray robes brought tea and oranges. Our special friend surprised us then by taking out a bottle marked Gilbey's Gin and pouring some of the contents into his tea. When we gently teased him, he explained that the bottle contained nothing more than purified water; his tea was a

bit too strong. Then we began our lessons. Although we usually drilled each other from textbooks or recited into the school's tape recorder, that day we decided to hold conversation practice.

"There are so many soldiers surrounding the pagoda," we noted.

"Yes," he said. "Today all the pagodas in Viet Nam have been surrounded by the military. It is a very bad situation."

"Are you at liberty to leave the grounds?" we asked.

"I dare not," he replied.

"How long do you think the martial law will continue?" we asked, after a pause to look up the Vietnamese term for "martial law."

"I do not know," the monk said. He wanted to say more, but his English, and at that point our Vietnamese, was too limited. So he shook his head and said only, "I am very sorry. I am very sorry."

That evening, when we left our house to go to the photo shop across the street, there were still a few people walking about. Outside our window three people squatted around a small fire on the sidewalk, saying prayers and lighting incense. We thought that perhaps the martial law, particularly in this small provincial town, would not be taken so seriously after all. But by nine o'clock everything was deadly silent except for an occasional military truck passing by. It was a stark contrast to most nights, when the streets were active until late, particularly with hawkers of *pho*, a popular and delicious noodle soup, and of half-hatched duck eggs, a great delicacy for those who don't mind the taste of tiny feathers and partially formed beaks that go with it. Each hawker had a different call, and some tapped rhythmically with a wooden stick on a sonorous piece of bamboo in order to attract attention. But not that night.

Many people listened to their radios, particularly to the respected BBC broadcasts from London, which were generally considered the most objective. In Saigon, the radio said, troops had invaded the main Xa Loi Pagoda, which only days before was seething with activity. Government authorities were claiming that arms had been hoarded in the pagodas and that many "pro-Communist, rebel Buddhists" had to be imprisoned or killed in order to preserve the national unity.

We continued to visit our friend every afternoon at four. Two days later, in another "conversation class," the school principal's weekly radio program served as the point of departure. The latest script, and our lesson, was entitled "Liberty and the Buddhist Religion." After laboriously looking up the words we did not know, we emerged with a fervent plea for freedom of religion and thought and a denunciation of everything that went against it. "We are given no freedom," the monk explained. "The government leaders are all Catholics and they do not give freedom to the Buddhists."

"But aren't you afraid of being arrested for saying such things in public?" we asked.

"Perhaps I will be arrested," he said. "But I would be very happy to die in defense of freedom." We sat and looked at each other for a few seconds. He was smiling sweetly.

Tension had been building up throughout the country to the point where even we felt somewhat nervous about reading aloud from the monk's writings. We had occasional visions of hidden microphones picking up our words as we repeated his antigovernment remarks in an effort to master their pronunciation. As we left his monastic cell, the gongs were ringing, drums were pounding, and the faithful were chanting their prayers in the pagoda. We walked our bicycles through the mud of the compound, wondering what the armed soldier at the entrance thought about all this and about those praying inside. We wondered whether he himself might be a Buddhist.

A few days later, we were again together in the monk's cell. He was just taking up a knife to cut an orange for our refreshment when a messenger ran into the room and handed him a letter. It demanded his immediate presence at the office of the local province chief. That night, when we turned on the radio to hear the monk's regular Saturday broadcast, we heard nothing that sounded like a religious talk. There was only the usual variety of Vietnamese popular songs. Returning for class the next day, we learned that the province chief had summoned the young monk merely to inform him that his radio program was being canceled. "We have no freedom," our friend said again. "I am very sorry."

As if to underline his words, the pagoda and school grounds had

become by then a virtual campsite for soldiers. Some had set up tents, while others slept in a crude barracks built across the street. There were more than a hundred soldiers in all. But our friend showed no rancor. He did not blame the province chief or the soldiers themselves. The orders for all this, he said, came from President Ngo Dinh Diem. As we left, he handed us a pamphlet in both Vietnamese and English, entitled *Principles of Buddhism*. "All life is suffering," it said.

The Buddha taught that men must follow the Eightfold Path of self-development which leads to the end of suffering. The Eightfold Path consists in Right Views or preliminary understanding, Right Aims or Motive, Right Speech, Right Acts, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Concentration or mind-development, and finally, Right Samadhi, leading to full Enlightenment. As Buddhism is a way of living, not merely a theory of life, the treading of this Path is essential to self-deliverance. The pamphlet ended with an admonition: "Cease to do evil, learn to do good, cleanse your own heart: this is the Teaching of the Buddha."

On entering the pagoda grounds some four days later, we were stopped for the first time by one of the soldiers on guard. He wanted to know where we were going, but we had barely answered when another soldier across the street shouted to his colleague to let us go. We rushed inside, but our friend was nowhere in sight. Another monk ushered us into his cell, served us tea, and asked us to wait. After a few minutes had passed, we asked whether it might not be best to return the next day. We thought our monk might be busy elsewhere. But we were kindly advised to wait. Fifteen minutes later, our friend arrived—accompanied by half a dozen military police. It was, in effect, a small pagoda raid.

Although they were not brutal, the police had a job to do and they did it: they confiscated the prized tape recorder and four tapes, taking them to the province chief's office. The machine had of course been used for the "subversive" radio program, but the majority of the tapes contained only our own English lessons. The monk was a pathetic figure as the police walked off with the expensive machine which the school had purchased with its own funds. "Now my students will not have English tapes from which to learn," he

muttered. But we could do nothing except sit there silently. We wanted to go and wait outside, but the door from the narrow cell was blocked by the police. After they left about half an hour later, the monk told us that they had also been there the night before and had confiscated his typewriter and mimeograph machine. Neither of us, to be sure, felt much like studying language at that point.

Yet even in adversity there were small things for which to be thankful. Another monk, the one who had told us to wait, came in a few moments later and dramatically lifted the small pillow from our friend's bed. With a mischievous grin he removed a transistor radio from its hiding place—one item saved from the eyes of the marauding military police. We all sat back and laughed together. Then, feeling the need to release our pent-up tensions, we walked over to the schoolyard and joined a group of students playing volleyball. The young principal seemed to forget his woes as he played joyfully, unimpeded by his long gray robes. When we left, however, he turned serious again. "Can you write articles on what you have seen for foreign newspapers?" he asked. We had to explain that we could not. As IVS members, we were supposed to stay out of politics.

Still, we had come to feel great admiration and affection for this young monk who faced such adversity and had said with a calm smile that he would be quite willing to die for his cause. Even though we knew the secret police were well informed of our actions and associations, we continued to visit the pagoda every day. But the worshipers did not dare to come anymore. The pagoda was quiet and the usually happy monks seemed sad and dispirited. Yet they seemed to appreciate our coming, providing them as it did with a daily ray of sunshine from the outside. Oddly, perhaps, we never knew any of their names. We were taught to address them as "thay"—teacher—and that was name enough for us.

On what was to be our last visit—it was September by then and we were moving to another town—things seemed to be going better for them. The day before, our friend had announced in the course of the conversation class that the province chief wanted to see him at five o'clock in order to tell him to teach a civics course at the school. "Civics," naturally, meant government propaganda—a

course on President Diem and his theories of ruling. But the monk did not want to go to the province office again, so, in our presence, he signed a letter to the chief saying that he was too busy with school affairs. In his place he sent two other monks, noting to us that if he were forced to teach such a civics course he would cease all work and go on strike. At five fifteen, however, an official car and a messenger were at the door. The province chief was demanding his presence. Still, relations seemed to have been smoothed over in the end. The monk had not only succeeded in avoiding the necessity of teaching a Diemist civics course, but he had also been assured that his tape recorder, typewriter, and mimeograph machine would be returned. Pleasantly surprised at his victory, we asked him how he had managed it. "I just talked with the province chief calmly and reasonably," he said, smiling.

That evening, black rain clouds gathered on the horizon. The murmurs of twilight mixed with the gong and drum sounds emanating from the pagoda. "Reality is indescribable," admonished our pamphlet on the principles of Buddhism. Although we had promised to visit whenever we could return to his town, we were never to see the monk again. A month later, we received a letter from another Vietnamese friend:

I have one mourning news for you. The monk headmaster of the Buddhist secondary school was died about a week ago in a very fatal automobile accident. I was informed that you had sent to him a letter. But he didn't alive to read it. May God Bless you.

Even now, more than five years later, our friend's picture sits on the altar of his pagoda, alongside that of the famous Thich (Venerable) Quang Duc, who had burned himself to death for his faith. For the monks believe that our friend too had been a victim of the government. Although the details are still enshrouded in mystery, people in the town later told us that his automobile "accident" was intentional—he had been hit head-on by a two-and-one-half-ton Saigon government military truck. It was only later that we noted some uncompleted handwritten notes on the back of the pamphlet he had given us. Translated from Vietnamese, they read as follows: "I am a person who has failed on the road of life. When I was young, I

always searched for a way of living appropriate to high ideals. But alas, I have been mistaken and I erred in misery.”

The role of religion in Vietnamese life and politics is very complex. On the local level, religious leaders have been particularly important in community affairs. Government-appointed village officers, in fact, often have little influence, owing their positions largely to the fact that they are considered politically loyal and that they can read and write well enough to handle the paperwork involved in their jobs. Village priests or monks, however, enjoy considerable influence. We soon learned that any projects we undertook in the hamlets would need to have the approval and support of these religious leaders in order to succeed. Without their support, projects might be subverted or they might fail.

We found that Catholic priests were the most patriarchal in their attitudes toward “their” villagers. While Catholic hamlets usually gave the impression of being the best organized, and while their strength usually served as a source of support to the government, in other cases overzealous priests could cause a certain amount of trouble. In Thanh Binh hamlet, for example, the government had constructed a school with three classrooms, since there was no other public school in the vicinity. Teachers were trained in the province capital and sent back to open classes. But they did not teach, and right beside the empty government school three new classrooms were being constructed in exactly the same style. The priest, toward whom the villagers themselves expressed a combination of respect and some fear, refused to give permission for children to attend any school other than his own. When we last passed through Thanh Binh, almost four years later, his private school (for which the children had to pay tuition) was still full while the government one was being boycotted and falling into disrepair. The local province chief, in addition, admitted he was helpless in the matter, since he was afraid that any action on his part would be interpreted as being anti-Catholic.

In another hamlet nearby, it was the same story. The hamlet chief stated the council’s decision to request a school as a self-help project. Then the priest walked up. When he heard of the plans, he

did not even turn to the hamlet chief but rather to us directly. "No, we don't need a school here," he said. "We already have one up the road." He was referring to his parochial school. We asked the hamlet chief again. Intimidated, he agreed with the priest, and the whole project was dropped, though not without some discussion among the men standing around. A few weeks later another council meeting was held and somehow, it seemed, they decided to go ahead with the school idea in spite of the priest's negative position. It was unusual to circumvent him in this way, and there was some speculation that province authorities had applied pressure. But the priest won anyway. In the end he managed to control the new school as well as his older parochial school.

For official American aid representatives, Vietnamese Catholic priests and nuns were at times the bane of their existence. Again, it was because they were so well organized. In one Highlands province heavily populated by Northern Catholic refugees, the "little black ladies," as the AID man called the nuns, seemed to appear every day with a new request for cement or bulgur wheat or something else. In return, they would offer him various vegetables or potatoes from their gardens, or even guinea pigs for him to eat. They were not begging, really, because the people in those villages devoted a considerable amount of work to improving their own lives and facilities. Schools, orphanages, and libraries sprouted up everywhere. Some of the cement, to be sure, they wanted in order to construct magnificent cathedrals, and it was always questionable in U.S. circles whether American aid should be used for such ends, or even to support private religious groups at all. But while the constant requests for materials became bothersome at times, they reflected an admirable will on the part of the nuns. Even the construction of cathedrals might have been justified in terms of the psychological advantages it offered the people—advantages which may, in the end, have contributed more to their well-being than endless material goods.

After a time, the Buddhists, too, began to request assistance from the Americans, particularly as they gained new confidence in the aftermath of the Diem period. Still, and especially to Americans, the Buddhists seemed less organized and less interested in helping their

own people than the Catholics. The refugee camps they sponsored often appeared physically inferior to Catholic camps. (Government camps were the worst of all, both physically and psychologically.) Our own volunteers, who often associated spiritually with the Buddhists over the sometimes "grasping" Catholics, wished that they could find ways to help Buddhist orphanages or Buddhist villages. But as a rule the Buddhists tended to be less interested in our help. The explanation for this lay in the differences between the two religions themselves. Thich Nhat Hanh, a leading Buddhist monk and social worker, put it this way:

The West . . . , when it looks at Buddhism, tends to make a comparison between its subtle and ingrained relationship to the people and the highly organized, structured organization of such religions as Catholicism. The Christian missionaries are far better in terms of organization than the local Buddhist institutions. The extensive Western resources behind them make it possible for them to establish impressive schools, hospitals, and other forms of social organization. . . . A superficial comparison of these highly organized activities with the local Buddhist structure is likely to convince the observer that Buddhism has no future. But when one goes more deeply, one discovers that the strength of Buddhism does not lie in organization, but in the deep roots of the psychological and moral values held by people.*

Buddhism, in fact, is to some extent a part of all Vietnamese. Its long history in Viet Nam, dating back to the second century A.D., has made it a strong element in the cultural ethos of the country. In the eleventh century, under the Ly dynasty, Buddhist monks exerted considerable influence on the national government, and their faith was virtually the state religion for a time. After the Ly and under the Tran, a gradual "confucianizing" occurred and Buddhism was influenced by the folk beliefs and animistic ideas already present in the society. Then, around the end of the seventeenth century, as Buddhism rose again in importance and as the strength of Confucianism faltered, the various thought patterns of the people tended to mix. What resulted was the present, peculiarly Vietnamese synthesis of religions mentioned in Chapter 2.

When the French took over Viet Nam, installing and quite natu-

* *Vietnam: Lotus in a Sea of Fire* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1967).

rally favoring Catholicism, Buddhism first came to be associated with nationalism. This was in a sense inevitable, since Catholicism was associated with the foreigners and Buddhism was an indigenous force. The pagoda was a religious and social center to which only Vietnamese would come, whereas the Christian churches were built by foreigners and worshiped in by those who followed and worked for the foreigners. Little changed, in fact, when the French left and Ngo Dinh Diem took power. Diem was a Catholic (he nearly became a priest), and as president he ruled the country with what many called a combination of Catholic morality and Confucian mandarin paternalism. The Buddhists later charged that under his rule they had been repressed. But they were not really repressed so much as they were discriminated against or by-passed as favors tended to go to Catholics. Most land grants, for example, went to Catholics to build schools and hospitals, as did the most favorable agricultural credit loans, most lumbering privileges, and certain export-import monopolies. The influence of the priests was great, and conversions became numerous among opportunists. As Communist insurgency accelerated, and Diem became more and more frightened, he relied increasingly on those he could trust—fellow Catholics. Vietnamese Catholics later admitted the preferences they were shown under Diem, preferences which were denied only by U.S. Ambassador Frederick Nolting, who said in the summer of 1963 that he had never seen "any evidence" of anti-Buddhist discrimination in Viet Nam.

On the morning of May 8, 1963, there was a Buddha's birthday celebration in Hue. It was a peaceful celebration and the atmosphere was festive, though speakers did protest a government decree prohibiting the flying of the Buddhist religious flag. This seemed to them a special sign of intolerance since days earlier the streets of Hue had been decked with Catholic flags for the anniversary of Ngo Dinh Thuc's (Diem's brother's) investiture as archbishop of Central Viet Nam. On the evening of May 8, an IVS English teacher at the boys' high school was on his way home from a coffee shop in the Citadel. Accompanied by one of his students, he crossed the main bridge across the Perfume River and immediately noticed a group of some five hundred people gathered around the Hue radio

station. They were demonstrating, it turned out, because the government radio had refused to play any Buddhist music or otherwise acknowledge the holiday—a peculiar stand since at least 80 per cent of the people in Viet Nam consider themselves Buddhist.

As time passed, the teacher later reported, the crowd grew to almost two thousand. A few students managed to get to the top of the radio station where they proudly displayed their flags, much to the pleasure of the onlookers. Still, everyone was quite orderly. The announcement was made that if the head monk was not permitted inside the station to plead their case, then everyone would remain until he was heard. Shortly after that, it was said that the mayor of the city had arrived and would be followed by military forces to “protect the Buddhists.” “From whom will they protect the Buddhists?” the IVSer asked his friend. “Everyone here is Buddhist!”

Deciding it would be wiser to leave, the teacher and his friend made their way slowly through the crowd to their bicycles. But the military had already arrived with foot troops, armored trucks, tanks, and fire trucks. The latter suddenly opened up on the crowd with their water hoses. “At this point,” the IVS teacher told us, “I was right at the corner trying frantically to get my bicycle and get out, but with no success as I couldn’t get through the people. Just then I heard a terrific explosion and the sounds of rapid fire from a rifle. Thinking some fool VC had gotten into the crowd and thrown a bomb into the radio station causing some trigger-happy soldier to open up with his rifle, I got scared. People were running in every direction. Suddenly I heard another terrific explosion and actually felt the heat of it against my cheek—the tanks had begun to fire. The soldiers seemed to be shooting right into the crowd. I dropped my bike and took off. People and bikes were strewn all over the street. I knew that I had panicked and that I should stop and be more careful, but those fool guns were right at my back and I was out to save my own life. Explosions and machine-gun fire followed the crowd right down the street. It never ceased. I finally got far enough away to take stock of the situation, but found myself totally confused. The only thing that I could think of was, ‘Why aren’t I dead?’

“Then the rage hit me,” he continued. “The Vietnamese govern-

ment had fired on its own people who were peacefully demonstrating. I have now joined the ranks of the average Vietnamese who don't know what to think. We're fighting a war against the Communists and our own government attacks us. For the government to fire on the crowd, to create a panic in which eight people—mostly women and children—were killed and others hurt, has further alienated the people. This is a bitter experience which no one who was there will soon forget. The government and its fight against communism has lost an important battle."

This incident was only the first of many that would bring some of the Buddhist groups into the political limelight for years to come. Tensions became almost unbearably high, particularly in Hue. The same volunteer teacher was asked by a seemingly desperate Vietnamese student whether he could have asylum in his house. He said he was being chased by the Diem police. The volunteer did not know quite what to say, fearing political involvement and trouble, but he could not, in the end, resist the urge to help. He invited the boy to come, only to have him then decline, saying he had only wanted to "test" the American.

The following summer saw the immolations that were to shock the entire world. It was very difficult for foreigners to understand the meaning of these actions. Their purpose was not to shock so much as to call attention to the need for changing the government's repressive policies. Among Vietnamese Buddhists, suicide is committed for a noble cause, not to escape from one's own problems but rather to make difficulties for those whose behavior has impelled the act. Through this form of sacrifice, according to Buddhist doctrine, one gains merit, and therefore it is an honor to be allowed to perform this final gesture as a human being. A Buddhist friend later recounted the story of one monk's burning which he had witnessed in Hue. It sounded ghastly, perhaps, to us as Westerners, but to him it was nothing less than awesome.

"He tried three different times to burn himself," our friend said. "The first time was at the spot marking the May 8th shooting by government troops. But he could not do it there; the police made him move on. Then he crossed the bridge and tried again at an intersection downtown, but once again he was pushed on by the

police. He felt very sad; he felt that he had not been chosen by Buddha for this great sacrifice. But on the third attempt he succeeded. That was on the grounds of Tu Dam Pagoda—probably you know the spot, for there is a big urn there to mark it now—at three o'clock in the morning. His helpers poured the gasoline all over him, and then he himself lit the match. Immediately he was enveloped by flames. His straight-postured body drooped forward several times, but each time a strong sense of will-power brought him back up. His mind was holding sway over his body. But finally his hands, held together in prayer, slowly spread apart, and then, suddenly, he collapsed, dead. All the bystanders, watching there in the pagoda yard, cried. It was so impressive."

In Saigon's Xa Loi Pagoda, which, until the August raids, was the center of 1963 Buddhist activities against the government, the heart of Thich Quang Duc was on display on the main altar. It was in a glass vase and appeared quite black, but the monks said that it was "the only part that would not burn." To Vietnamese, this seemed to lend heavenly approbation to their cause. Meanwhile, banners hung all around, begging for freedom from tyranny and for decency toward Buddhists. At the same time, loudspeakers broadcast prayers, religious music, and chants for the milling crowds. The atmosphere was electric—until the raids, and then everything was deadly still.

We volunteers were not directly affected by all these events, but again, we could not help being influenced and saddened by them. They were a major cause of resentment against the Diem government, for the President was unwilling to make any concessions to the Buddhists' legitimate demands or even, it seemed, to give them the benefit of the doubt and admit they were not all Communists. The *Times of Vietnam*, the daily mouthpiece of the Nhus, printed article after article quoting one venerable after another who had praised the government for its stance. There was no reason why these monks should not praise the government, however, for either they were forced to do so or else they were really secret police-agents, taxi drivers, or other miscellaneous persons who had been disguised as monks. One Vietnamese friend was surprised to find a pedicab driver she knew dressed in monk's robes at the local pagoda. The real monks were in jail, but appearances had to be kept up.

In late October, a United Nations observer team came at President Diem's invitation to see how happy the monks really were. In the main pagoda in Dalat, however, there was only one real monk remaining. The rest were taxi drivers. Such distortions for the benefit of the U.N. observers went beyond the pagodas. All the waiters in one hotel where the observers were to eat lunch were dismissed and replaced by government agents who wanted to overhear their comments. Some Vietnamese wondered why the service was so poor. The U.N. team members were not all fooled, however. A secretary with the group said that while the "planted monks" were talking with the visitors, real monks were whispering in her ear, "Don't believe them."

The Buddhists, along with the students, were instrumental in bringing about Diem's fall. The army, to be sure, struck the final blow, but it probably would not have done so had popular feeling not been as strong as it was. After the coup there was concern that the tables would simply be turned and that Buddhists would now discriminate against Catholics, but this did not happen. On the other hand, with the new climate of freedom, expensive Buddhist pagodas and meeting halls did seem to sprout at a faster rate, some monks rode in fine cars, and May, 1964, saw the largest celebration of Buddha's birthday within living memory—at least, friends said, since the French had first come to Viet Nam. It lasted an entire week, cost \$40,000 (high for Viet Nam), and culminated in a mammoth parade with floats and more than 100,000 marchers spread out as far as the eye could see down the fashionable boulevards of Saigon. Also, friends who had been equivocal about their religion before, like the one who had closed his letter "May God bless you," now proudly admitted their identity by signing off, "I pray that Our Lord Buddha will extend to you happiness and prosperity." Vietnamese in general admitted that they could be more friendly to Americans, since the Diem government policy had been rather hostile, partly because of American sympathy for the Buddhists.

By early 1965, however, religious differences had again become quite sharp, in some places approaching the intensity of 1963. Where many Vietnamese, particularly Catholics, had dismissed the religious question as a divisive factor in Vietnamese life and politics prior to

1963, they now saw it as another woeful stumbling block to national unity. Americans probably made more of the issue than Vietnamese, but government cabinets were chosen as much for religious balance in that period as they were for regional and other considerations. Again, it was at the provincial level that we had the most experience with these phenomena.

In Hue the lines seemed especially sharply drawn. Catholic student leaders claimed that in the early part of the year, during the Buddhist demonstrations against the Tran Van Huong government, they had been pursued by Buddhist student leaders with evil intentions. "They tried to have us kidnapped," said one, "and they are always pouring recriminations upon us Catholics." Capitalizing on the apparent preference of American officialdom for Catholics because of their outspoken anticommunism, he reminded us that it was the Buddhists who had angrily burned the American library. Anyone who was anti-American, he said, must be pro-Communist. Yet to some extent the change in fortunes was borne by these Catholics as being part of the rules of the game. The same leader who complained of Buddhist designs upon him once accompanied us on a visit to a newly opened dormitory for fine-arts students in Hue. As we were being shown around, he turned to us with a tolerant smile and said, "I don't know why I'm taking this tour. This was my uncle's house until the government seized it and threw him in prison." His uncle had been a Catholic and a member of the hated Diemist Can Lao party.

By mid-1965 these wounds, which probably had more to do with political associations than with religion itself, were healing. The new phase that was developing, while led by one faction of the Buddhist hierarchy—Thich Tri Quang's militants—did to some extent cross religious lines. (It did not draw active support from all Buddhist quarters, since the Buddhists were divided into several groups.) This was the Struggle Movement, the civil war within the war that would finally explode in 1966. We were getting hints of what would come from friends and associates before that, however, and we felt that a responsive government in Saigon could have avoided it. Again, however, the government was not responsive and neither were the Americans.

"Why, after all we've done for them, are those Vietnamese so anti-American?" Americans back home would ask in hurt astonishment. Others read about the demonstrations and decided that the only answer was to "bring the boys back home." "If the Vietnamese don't want us," the argument went, "to hell with them." Neither reaction was a fair one, and indeed it took patience to understand just what the Struggle Movement was all about. *Dan Toc* (The People) magazine asked itself this question in a summer 1965 article, "Why Do We Struggle?" "When we deal with the purpose of defending the national sovereignty and the self-determination of our people," it began, "we do not mean to be anti-American as the innocent and superficial people usually think. It's not our problem to object against the U.S.A., our best allied country, since we accept in principle the presence of the Americans as a necessity in our special present situation. We only want to call the attention of the Vietnamese and American governments to carry out concrete solutions to make the relationship between the two countries become better and better."

Some of the problems for which the Struggle Movement people were asking solutions seemed vague or minor to many Americans. They were essentially political, economic, and social problems, not religious ones. The Buddhists were involved only because they had taken up the nationalist banner. "You must bear in mind that Buddhism in Viet Nam is not the same as when it was first born," said Thich Tri Quang. "Our most sacred duty is to preserve our faith and to advise our followers. . . . If our country is lost, then our people would lose their identity and Buddhism could no longer survive. In other words, the Buddhists must vigilantly protect their country's interests, because that is in the interests of their own faith."

Those who would become active in the Struggle cited the issues: they wanted the two governments concerned, Vietnamese and American, to make known the exact number of foreign soldiers in the country, the military bases where they were stationed, and their rights and the period of time they were to stay in Viet Nam. In addition to concern over such arrangements between the Saigon government and U.S. authorities, they were disturbed that the use

of American currency was interfering with the sovereignty of their own currency. The behavior of American troops and the disposition of their garbage were equally severe problems. One bright young professor at the University of Hue raised the issue almost every time he met Consulate officials. Although tradition-oriented Hue itself was kept largely off-limits to U.S. military personnel—an extraordinarily wise move—Da Nang at first was not. And since the two key cities were only three hours apart by road, people from Hue traveled frequently to Da Nang, where they got a first-hand look at cultural disintegration. On either side of the main highway, and in between vast refugee settlements stuck on the sand, the marines were depositing their garbage. The nationalistic young Hue professor was appalled not only at the sight of beer cans and cigarette cartons everywhere, but even more by the idea of Vietnamese children scrounging for any still usable items amidst it all. "Can't you dump your garbage somewhere else?" he asked. "Somewhere so it isn't so visible and degrading to our self-respect?" The American consular officials finally did take up the matter with the marines. The next time the professor asked about it, he was told that according to the marines a Vietnamese trucking company was responsible for carting off the garbage and there was nothing the Americans could do about the problem.

As for the carousing of the troops, there was little the American authorities could do to prevent this either. Officials would report that American troop behavior was much better than it had been in past wars where the Americans were occupying powers, and certainly the tensions the troops were under made it thoroughly understandable that they should need to let off steam. The Vietnamese were not unreasonable; they understood all this very well. Yet they could not help resenting it, particularly the way their girl friends were treated and the way prices soared because of the spendthrift Americans. The intelligent and dignified wife of one friend got especially tired of having her fanny pinched every time she went downtown for errands. A staunch anti-Communist Catholic, she said, "I sympathize with those young boys and they are good for coming here to help us. But now I am really disgusted by them. I can't stand them. Why must they be so rude?" Ambassador Lodge

knew about the problem and issued a special memorandum about it:

In expressing our friendship for the Vietnamese people, I ask the help of each American in Vietnam. We have left our homes thousands of miles away to serve here among a brave people as their friends from the free world. Yet, as always, the process of living closely together demands more than ordinary attention to common courtesies and to signs of respect. We are not only partners of the Vietnamese people, but also we are guests.

The American smile and a friendly greeting are part of our best heritage and assets. Let us be more generous in using them every day—with the Vietnamese with whom we work, with the Vietnamese who see us passing by in the streets, with the Vietnamese who have become part of our social lives.

Let the Vietnamese get to know us as we really are. In their hour of national need, this can be very important.

Most important to the Vietnamese, however—and their demand for it could be called neither minor nor vague—was the need for a broad-based and popular government to replace the unresponsive military junta under Thieu and Ky. Vietnamese reasoning on this matter not only concerned the short-run desires for justice and peaceful social revolution, but it also related to the problem of an eventual negotiated settlement of the war. Its logic was explained to us by a Buddhist friend, a student leader who, according to the Catholics, was behind the burning of the American library a few months earlier. (He himself impishly explained away his role in the incident by saying, "I was sick the day that happened.") Whether he was behind that particular incident or not, it is important to understand his outlook and that of his colleagues. We talked with him late one October afternoon at a small and rustic coffee house inside Hue's Citadel.

He began by asking us what we thought about the progress of the war.

"Well," we said, "it seems to be going better now than before. There seem to be a number of victories over the Viet Cong." This was after the first few months of direct American troop participation.

"That's true," our friend agreed. "But have you ever noticed that all the big victories seem to be scored by the Americans? Our own Vietnamese troops don't appear to be doing much. That is not a good sign." We wondered what he was leading up to, and soon found out as he continued: "Our troops don't have a good motivation for fighting. They don't like the government they see directing them—the corrupt generals and all. And they don't understand why the Americans are fighting here. They are a little suspicious. They do not have anything clear-cut to fight for."

"What do you suggest?" we asked lamely. It was the moment he had been waiting for.

"We must declare the goal of our fighting, and the goal of our fighting is an ultimate peace. Peace is the most urgent desire of all our people, and the soldiers, after all, come from the people at large. If our troops know that they are fighting for peace, they will fight hard in order to get the war over with. But there is one problem: up to now, anyone who talks about peace is considered to be a Communist or at least pro-Communist. This is very wrong. Why should the Communists have a monopoly on the desire for peace?"

To us, his observations made a great deal of sense. Popular folk-singers like Pham Duy were officially frowned upon by government leaders because they sang passionately of the yearning for peace.

"What we need in Viet Nam now," our friend told us, "is a third force. To understand this, just look at what we have: on the one side is the Viet Cong and China behind them; on the other side is the regime in Saigon, supported by the Americans. They are dead-locked. Neither one can win. They fight against each other. But in the middle are the Vietnamese people. They are the ones who suffer. We must organize these people who are caught in between and who cry out for peace. It is they, the People of Viet Nam, who can save their country from this evil war."

"But how would this Third Force operate?" we asked. It sounded rather amorphous to us, though fine in principle.

"The Third Force will cooperate with the government in order to bring about a settlement between the Viet Cong and the United States. It will serve as a kind of intermediary between the two."

"Then it will have to take a somewhat anti-American position at

the same time as it takes an anti-Viet Cong one," we pointed out.

"Yes," he said, "by definition. But when the Third Force begins to operate, you must understand its reasons: it is for the sake of the preservation of our country against both the Communists and arbitrary military dictatorship. We are not really anti-American. We like the Americans and we appreciate all your help, but we must have a better solution than this series of unresponsive governments in Saigon."

So far we could not disagree. His platform made sense, and his criticism of the Saigon regime corroborated what we had seen ourselves and heard from others. Since American policy was involved, we asked him if he had discussed all this with the Consulate officials.

"No," he said, sounding reluctant, in fact, to do so.

"But you should," we urged. "If they knew about your views, perhaps they would improve the American policy accordingly."

He smiled disbelievingly and said, "Why don't *you* tell them?"

As he drove us home on the back of his motor scooter, he turned and smiled again. "You see, I'm not anti-American. If I were, I wouldn't ride around with you in public like this."

Feeling that we had been given a deep and unusual insight into the Buddhist view (though our friend did not refer to Buddhists, but rather to "the People"), we passed on the gist of his remarks to officials at the Consulate in Hue, as he had urged us to. The young officers there had rather limited contacts with the local population—partly because their staff turnover was so frequent and partly because ultranationalists tended to avoid American officials—and they were delighted to have such information. With great enthusiasm they sent a report on our conversation to the Embassy in Saigon. Whether anyone in Saigon ever read the report, however, or whether anything that happened in Hue was ever taken with any seriousness by the Embassy, would remain a matter for grave questioning in the months to come. Certainly the Embassy was not prepared when matters came to a head.

On the evening of March 10, 1966, our IVS agriculturalist in Hue returned to the house excited by news he had just heard. At the USAID office, where he had stopped to pick up mail, a radio mes-

sage had been received from civilian regional headquarters in Da Nang. "General Thi has just been ousted from his command," it said. "The Embassy supports his ouster, but if anyone asks you about it, say you don't know." General Nguyen Chanh Thi was the highly popular corps commander for the Hue-Da Nang region. He was from a village near Hue, spoke the local dialect, had a charming personality, and enjoyed excellent relations with the various political and religious groups in the region and particularly with the Buddhists and intellectuals of Hue University. In fact, General Thi was the only high military commander or government official in whom these people seemed to place any confidence at all. He was staunchly anti-Communist, having been imprisoned as a young corporal by the Viet Minh in 1945, at which time he experienced great suffering and brutality. Yet he felt deeply the need for a social revolution and responsive government for his people. When few other high officials dared to act, General Thi supported progressive social-action programs, such as those undertaken by various youth groups in his region. It was for all these reasons that he was fired by the other generals—among them the one he humorously called "our young prime minister," Marshal Ky. Although the ouster was disguised as a resignation for health reasons (sinus), the reality was that Thi was too popular and the generals felt him as a threat to their own power. Yet Thi had already refused at least two opportunities to become prime minister. "I am a military man," he would say. "My place is in the army, not in politics. Politics is for civilians and a civilian should be prime minister."

Presumably no one realized the furor that Thi's ouster would cause. Prime Minister Ky had just returned from the Honolulu Conference with President Johnson and was full of confidence. The American Mission itself presumably thought the confidence was justified. The fact that the Mission publicly denied any complicity in the Thi affair was a most unwise blemish on its credibility, especially since the evidence is so clear on this point. On March 11, one day after Thi was "urged to resign," General William Westmoreland wrote him a letter, expressing the belief that Thi was "interested in securing medical attention in the United States." It had therefore occurred to him, the letter went on, that Thi "might

welcome an invitation," on behalf of the U.S. Department of Defense, to use American medical facilities. Westmoreland concluded by noting that he could make all the necessary arrangements immediately, and he conveyed to Thi "every good wish." Eventually, Thi did go to Washington and to Walter Reed Army Hospital. But, as he explained later, he did not go for treatment; he went merely to visit and cheer up wounded American soldiers from Viet Nam.

Meanwhile, the Buddhists under Thich Tri Quang called for demonstrations. Even military troops, police, and government civil servants—including the deputy province chief—joined the marches. Schools and markets were closed (we had to stock up ahead on food), meetings were held, and government fell apart. It was the opportunity the Buddhists had been waiting for to press their demands, demands that had been ignored up to then. Incredibly, and for reasons that only he could understand, Ky sent the ousted Thi back to Da Nang with instructions to "calm the population." It was then, at a downtown rally, that General Thi explained his new position to his people. "I have decided to retire," he said, "because of my sinus condition. It especially affects my nose—so that everything seems to smell very bad." Things would smell a lot worse, however.

The demonstrations completely immobilized IVS activity in the northern regions, though volunteers in the delta continued work without even realizing that anything was amiss. (The delta region was frequently unaffected by religious or political movements that began in Central Viet Nam.) In Hue, long lines of demonstrators marched by within half a block of our house. At the beginning, friends sometimes waved to us from their ranks, though some later said they had been pressured into joining the Movement. The women were the most vigorous demonstrators. Wearing purple blouses and conical hats, they swung their arms back and forth and shouted in unison, "Down with Thieu and Co! Down with Thieu and Co!" It was interesting to note that during the first few demonstrations Ky was never mentioned. This was exactly as our Buddhist student leader friend had forewarned us. Co was chosen instead because of his known corruption, and Thieu was the Catholic and Can Lao chief-of-state. Ky was not initially included in the number

of "nefarious gangsters" because the Buddhist hierarchy did not want to strike at the whole government structure at once. "It is better to divide them so that they cannot get back at us so easily," we were told by one of the clever planners.

Although many of our more moderate friends and associates in Hue became concerned as the Struggle Movement took a more violent direction, more of them than ever before agreed this time with the general principles of the Struggle: namely, an end to arbitrary and unresponsive government (of the kind that so crudely dismissed the popular General Thi) and a call for democratic, popularly elected, civilian government. Anything that stood in the way of these goals, they were also against, and it was in this respect that they became anti-American and carried anti-U.S. banners: "Viet Nam for the Vietnamese," "Down with U.S. intervention in Vietnamese internal affairs," "Down with U.S. hindering the formation of a democratic, popularly elected government." The Americans, everybody knew, were wedded to the Ky regime, believing that even this time Ky could "carry it off." If anyone had doubted this for a moment, or if some had hoped for a more enlightened policy for change, these feelings were crushed when the U.S. Mission in Saigon agreed to transport Ky's troops to Da Nang to quell the rebellion. Ky's impulsive announcement that the whole movement was Communist-inspired and that its participants were Communists was a source of further outrage to the people. "Do you think we are Communists?" asked one very outspoken friend, in an attempt to bait us. When we said no, he was satisfied, adding that if the government continued to treat the people in such a way, then he was afraid it would only play into the hands of the Communists.

No one could ever be certain just how much Communist infiltration there was among the Struggle group. A French-Canadian priest likened the atmosphere in Hue to what he had experienced in Peking in 1949—just before it fell to the Chinese Communists. General Thi himself, still at liberty in Hue and Da Nang, warned the leader, Thich Tri Quang, that his movement was being infiltrated by Communist elements. Tri Quang, it seems, was not pleased by the implied criticism and did not respond. Although most of our friends reserved their strongest attacks for the Saigon government,

many did become fearful of a Communist coup that could capitalize on the violence and turmoil. Yet, the younger Buddhist leaders insisted that they knew exactly what they were doing and were certain that they were in full control of the situation. The monks, for their part, had a Buddhist solution to the Communist problem. Thich Don Hau, then the chief religious monk in that whole area (he was always considered very nonpolitical), would recite parables of love and peace when one raised the subject of communism. Looking over from the terrace of Linh Mu Pagoda toward the gardens and the seven-storied tower, he once said that the only way for man to be saved was not through doctrines like communism or capitalism, but through man's own individual goodness and through practicing love. "Yes, Venerable," we had said, "but how is man to achieve this individual goodness?" "Buddhism teaches 80,000 different ways," he assured us with supreme confidence, but without elaborating.

Americans could never understand the faith of the Buddhists, which seemed to apply to politics as much as to religion. Even some Vietnamese could not understand it, and one friend, a deep thinker himself, reported that he had been entirely mystified by a conversation he'd had with Thich Tri Quang. If one asked the Buddhist leaders who would fulfill their qualifications for a national leader and who could thus replace Thieu and Ky if the latter two were deposed, the answer was invariably, "Oh, there are many good leaders. That is no problem." It was never explained whether such a person should be a Buddhist or why he had not come to the fore already in a country searching for capable leadership. It was possible they were only expressing a truly religious faith that someone would emerge, without having any clear idea themselves who he would be. It was even more possible that when they assured their questioners that the Communists would not win out in the shuffle, they meant that Buddhism would prevail over communism only in the spiritual sense—that the country might indeed fall to the NLF, but that Buddhist ideals would hold sway in the minds of the people over whatever new ideas the Front tried to impose. Buddhist leaders sometimes said that if the Communists tried to profit from their movement, then they would have to fight the Communists. But

