VIETNAM'S
DEMOGRATIC ONE-MAN RULE

A Far Eastern specialist questions accepted Western views on Asia's road to freedom

When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master, that's all."

Every age has its shibboleths, every people its fetishes and phobias. The color words which express our fears and hopes, our likes and dislikes, constitute a semantic corset in which we bind ourselves as we march bravely along in a world populated by scientific goblins, technological sprites and ideological angels and demons.

Our angels today are "democrats" and "anti-Communists"; our demons are "dictators" and "Communists."

These creatures come in many shapes, varied sizes and diverse forms. And when we stop every now and then to think about our "friends" and our "foes" we feel more than a little confused. For we are living in a world that has suddenly changed and expanded. The family of nations is no longer a comfortably small club of European "Powers," more or less Christian in character (with Japan holding "alternate membership"). No, now it includes all sorts of heathens—many of them brown, still others black, and most of them non-Christian!

In tropical West Africa, out of the loins of the British Commonwealth, is born a "constitutional" "democratic" state named Ghana. And before the ink is dry on its birth certificate, its elected leader is imprisoning his opponents and castigating his country's constitution in a most disconcerting manner. And on the ruins of the Dutch empire in the farthestmost Indies, an elected President who talks a good game of Jefferson has created what sounds like a contradiction in terms: a "guided democracy."

If things seem a bit confusing to us, it is because we are truly prisoners of our political vernacular. Even as our cultures haven't managed to keep pace with developments in technology, our languages have failed to stay abreast of political change. Recently, one articulate observer shrugged his verbal shoulders in annoyance over the inadequacies of the English language. He recognized the emotional trap involved in the word "dictatorship," and he explained that when he talked about the political systems of Asia he was referring to "Hamiltonian rather than Jeffersonian principles."

But is this a valid conclusion? Are we faced only with a choice between—to use the horrible term once more—dictators of different complexions? Let us examine here his prime example: Vietnam.

For 90 years, Vietnam was a colony of France, kept subjugated by force. By their occupation of French Indo-China from 1940 to 1945, the Japanese ended for all time the legend of white invincibility. After VJ Day, the attempted restoration of full French control over Vietnam was never successful. And after the disaster at Dien-bi-phu in 1954, the French regime of Pierre Mendés-France "simplified" France's costly involvement in the peninsula: he turned over the northern half of Vietnam to the Communist Vietminh—and gave them a promissory note on the southern half, collectable after elections which presumably would take place two years later.

As we now know—much to our satisfaction and to the confusion of our enemies—things just didn't work out the way the negotiators at Geneva in July 1954 thought they would. And the principal reason for this surprising development has been the leadership given the free remnant of Vietnam since 1954 by Ngo Dinh Diem.

Is Ngo Dinh Diem a "dictator" or a "democrat"? As one examines the structure of the Republic of Vietnam and the behavior of President Ngo, he learns that (a) Ngo Dinh Diem has all the authority and all the power one needs to operate a dictatorship, but (b) he isn't op-

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erating one! Here is a leader who speaks the language of democracy, who holds the powers of a dictator, and who governs a Republic in accordance with the terms of a Constitution. The Constitution was written at his request by a National Assembly which he caused to be elected by the people of the Republic.

Ngo Dinh Diem did not have to do this. His authority and power at that moment were so absolute that he could have ruled for many years as a dictator, had he chosen to do so. But he chose instead the path of limited government, out of a long-standing and unshakable belief, which he had enunciated publicly time and again even before he came to power, that the keys to the restoration of Vietnam’s stature were “the independence of the nation and the liberty of the people.”

He came to power on July 7, 1954, having been selected by the Emperor Bao Dai—a lifelong political opponent—and with French approval, to be the “fall guy” when the terms of the Geneva accords would be announced. For it was a foregone conclusion as early as the first week in May 1954, that France was going to have to give up Indochina, unless it was willing to take its chances on a further expansion and extension of a war which had already cost it fantastic treasure in both lives and material wealth. France was not willing. The new French Premier, Mendê-Franco, set himself a time limit for the settlement of the Indochina problem. And he understood that the settlement would offer France, at best, a period of grace before the end.

Ngo took office as Prime Minister with “full powers, civil and military.” This extraordinary grant of authority was his price for accepting the task of attempting the impossible: holding his country together in the face of a devastating flood of Communist military victories. Within three weeks, his country was cut in two and he was left with an incredible set of problems to resolve. True, the shooting war apparently was ended, at least for the time being. But under the provisions of the Geneva agreements, he had to repatriate his military forces from the now-Communist north and resettle whatever civilians might choose to move from the north to his zone of Vietnam. His representatives at Geneva had refused to sign the accords; nevertheless, his Government was regarded by its French sponsors and many other powers as responsible under them.

During the next 300 days (the time allotted for free movement between the two zones), Ngo’s Government, aided by the U.S. and France, received and temporarily resettled—without a single untoward incident or an epidemic of disease—some 850,000 refugees from the Communist zone. And today virtually all these people are self-supporting citizens, truly a record to remember when one thinks of the tragedy that has marked similar refugee movements elsewhere in the world.

But this was not all. The new Prime Minister learned quickly enough that his “full powers, civil and military,” existed principally on paper. He could not control the police: They were the property—bought and paid for—of the Binh Xuyen, a gang of thugs and racketeers who also had a well-trained and well-equipped army, and who controlled gambling, narcotics and prostitution in the capital city of Saigon. The National Army was commanded by an opportunistic Chief of Staff, General Nguyen-van-Hinh, who held a commission simultaneously as a major in the French Air Force, and who thought he could make a better Prime Minister than Ngo Dinh Diem.

Vast sections of real estate in South Vietnam were ruled in feudal fashion by leaders of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao religious sects, which also maintained their own armies (subsidized by the French) and set a high price on their cooperation with the new Prime Minister. The Communists, after partition, withdrew their main fighting forces to the north, but left behind several thousand cadres, who were instructed to await “the day” when their leaders would move back in and take over. And the French, who regarded Ngo as anti-French, not only expected him to fall momentarily; they even made occasional unofficial efforts to assist him out of office.

Finally there were the bureaucrats. France had never permitted the Vietnamese to run their own government and administration, notwithstanding many highly publicized promises to that effect. Vietnamese cabinet ministers before Ngo’s time were surrounded by French “advisors”; Duong-tan-Tai, a former Minister of Finance in one of the earlier “independent” cabinets of Bao Dai, likes to tell how the next nearest Vietnamese in his administrative hierarchy was some four levels below him. So Ngo inherited a civil service which had had virtually no experience in decision-making positions.

Ngo managed to survive. He ousted the Chief of Staff without a fight, drove the Binh Xuyen armies from the capital in a series of bloody encounters, won over or vanquished the military forces of the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao, resettled the refugees, and reduced the Communist capability in South Vietnam from that of mounting a coup against him to one of sheer nuisance activity.

Naturally, this all required strong leadership and considerable political flexibility and manipulative skill. Nevertheless, it was rather difficult for our journalists on the scene (or on the rewrite desks back in New York) and for our political commentators to make up their minds about him. During his first 300 days, Ngo was described variously as: weak, strong, monk-like or ascetic, friendly, stern, inefficient, honest, corrupt, anti-French, anti-American, America’s puppet, sectarian (a reference to the fact that he is a Roman Catholic), Cardinal Spellman’s choice, indecisive, strong-minded, slow-acting, decisive, clumsy, skilful, conservative, liberal, and heaven only knows what else.

As a matter of fact, the only thing on which thoughtful pundits agreed during Ngo’s first year in office was November 2, 1959
that his administration would fold at any moment; its failure was inevitable. And yet Ngo is with us today, and his regime now is assuredly one of the most stable and honest on the periphery of Asia. He has made highly acclaimed state visits to Washington, Manila, New Delhi, Rangoon and Bangkok, and his Government is recognized by 45 members of the United Nations. Surely here is an unusual man—and a frequently misunderstood one.

He is a devout Roman Catholic, holding the reins of government in a state whose people are largely Taoist and Buddhist in their religious and philosophical outlook. Perhaps 10 per cent of the population is Catholic, but the Vietnamese are notable for their spirit of religious tolerance. It is worth observing that although President Ngo destroyed the political and military power of the two native religions of Vietnam, Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, they reportedly have gained thousands of new adherents in the past three years. And yet, during the critical days of 1954-55, rumors of impending religious warfare circulated through the diplomatic colony in Saigon. What was not generally recognized was that most of these rumors originated with Europeans, or with axe-grinding Vietnamese who understood that religious issues are often extremely important in European and American politics.

Indeed, this is the heart of our problem. We see Asian situations through Western eyes and in terms of Western traditions and Western situations. We persist in attempting to apply our standards, 1959-style, to peoples and situations where they have little or no direct relevance. That our Asian friends and enemies understand this habit of ours is clear, as witness the burbling praise of American democratic thought and institutions that issued from the lips of President Achmed Sukarno of Indonesia during his state visit to the United States three years ago; and compare those words with his later remarks (and acts) after his return to his own country.

In Vietnam, as in the other new states of Asia that have burst forth like popping corn in the years since World War II, independence could not have been achieved and cannot be maintained, under prevailing world conditions, without strong leadership. And strong leadership implies the possession of great power. As Sebastian Chamfort remarked to Marmontel, who was deploiring the excesses of the French Revolution: “Do you suppose, then, that revolutions are made with rose water?”

As one travels through these newly born countries, he comes to realize that from the standpoint of the history of thought, the peoples of Southeast Asia are not, generally speaking, sufficiently sophisticated to understand what we mean by democracy and how they can exercise and protect their own political rights. And even though the leaders of the new states are making efforts to increase their peoples’ understanding of democratic concepts, their consciousness will be many years in awakening. With literacy rates that range from a low of perhaps 10 per cent to a high of possibly 50 per cent, the peoples of Southeast Asia should not be expected to understand, let alone embrace, the difficult articles of our democratic faith and practice. Furthermore, we often forget that our principles, stemming from Judaic-Christian-Hellenic traditions, are a far cry from “The Way” of Taoism or the orderly, correct society preached by Confucius.

This is not to say that the stirring principles of the Declaration of Independence do not exercise a magnetic attraction on many Asians. It is rather to caution that the articulate few in Southeast Asia who understand, accept and even preach the gospel of democracy are still the few. The unlettered majority, while they too may find

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the sound of the words appealing, are far more interested in the more immediate and tangible issues of securing and guarding their independence, increasing their standard of living and developing their countries. That individual human rights may often be neglected or sacrificed in this period of national infancy should not be surprising. We may find much consolation, however, in the fact that many of the new leaders in Southeast Asia are thinking and planning in terms of enlarged areas of freedom for individual citizens, when such developments will be possible without endangering “the independence of the nation and the liberty of the people.”

We do ourselves and our Asian neighbors a distinct
disservice when we insist on stretching them or shrinking them to fit our particular semantic bed. Implicit in this Procrustean semantics is the assumption of the superiority of our ideas and our ways of doing things. Not only is this in itself a rather undemocratic (or, at least, unegalitarian) assumption, but it brands us as ideologically blind and inflexible. We are unlikely to win many friends or campaigns in Asia if we continue to proceed from this snobbish base.

Ngo Dinh Diem, for example, rejects both absolute individualism and absolute state power. Whether or not we agree with his interpretation of history and his view of the ends of government, they are at the very least worthy of consideration. Transmitting to the National Assembly his ideas on what the then-projected Constitution of the Republic should contain, he wrote:

"We affirm that the sole legitimate end and object of the State is to protect the fundamental rights of the human person to existence and to the free development of his intellectual, moral and spiritual life.

"We affirm that democracy is neither material happiness nor the supremacy of numbers. Democracy is essentially a permanent effort to find the right political means for assuring to all citizens the right of free development and of maximum initiative responsibility and spiritual life. . . .

"Citizens are born free and equal before the law. The State should assure them equal conditions for the exercise of their rights and the accomplishment of their duties. It owes aid and protection to the family so that harmonious family life can develop. Citizens have the right to a secure and peaceful life, to justly remunerated work, to sufficient individual property to assure a dignified and free life, to democratic freedoms, and to the full development of their personalities.

"They have the duty of developing the national heritage for the Common Good and for universal peace, of safeguarding freedom and democracy, of defending the Nation and the Republic against all those who seek to destroy the foundation of the common life and the Constitution."

This Asian leader, who in four years' time has steered his little country from the edge of chaos to peace, stability, and a gradually increasing tempo of development, understands well the problems involved in establishing and maintaining a "democratic" state. He is a man of few illusions. He has studied the writings of Western theorists, and he has observed the tendency toward the development of the "welfare state" in the Western democracies. He has also witnessed the failure of parliamentary institutions in many of those countries. And so, in inaugurating the first session of the National Assembly (March 15, 1956), he said:

"The most urgent task before us is to organize political power in such a fashion as to make it manifest and appropriate for giving shape to long-range general policy, and at the same time preserving the fundamental rights of the Nation and of the individual human personality. . . . [We must balance] the requirements of ever-unifying power against the growing pressures of life.

"For a country as exposed as ours is from within and without, the possibilities of realizing the democratic ideal are of necessity limited. But we would betray the people were we incapable of responding to their ardent desire for a government of true freedom.

"The living and unconquerable faith which sustained us through the last two years of heavy trials, the watchful intelligence which kept us from giving in to despair and as a consequence turning to fascism, these must also furnish us with the resourcefulness and concentration to foster the growth of the permanent orientation of free men towards a democratic structure suited to the conditions and possibilities of the moment, but built out of a genuine respect for the dignity of the individual, from an ideal conception of community life where the common good takes precedence over the good of the individual, from a pluralism which does not represent either social conservatism or a collection of anarchical contradictions."

No one who has known Ngo Dinh Diem well can fail to be impressed by his determination to keep his country alive and bring increasing benefits, happiness and freedoms to his countrymen. That he is criticized is sure. But then, as Disraeli said, "the depository of power is always unpopular." It may seem paradoxical to some that out of strong governmental power may come individual freedom. But considering the context in which Vietnam exists, can one think of a more dependable method of assuring it?

We ought also to remember that while we put great store in "government by law," the Confucian ideal of "government by virtue" has for 2,500 years been a guiding principle in those Asian lands which felt the influence of Chinese political thought. Ngo was brought up in this tradition. His speeches and his writings reflect his debt to it. He would agree with Confucius that government by virtue, by moral influence and by personal example is of paramount importance. At the same time, he was educated by the West and spent more than three years in the U.S. (1950-53), examining what we had to offer. Perhaps we can learn from this man who is endeavoring to create an acceptable synthesis of East and West in Vietnam.

There is little percentage in continuing to try to force these (or any other) Asians into categories of our own making, which reflect only our own experience and wisdom. One of these days our political theorists will come up with a new vocabulary which will enable us to describe more satisfactorily the new orders in Asia. Until then, we should do well to attempt to understand what is taking place in these countries, and to remember that politics is not geometry and that arbitrary definitions do not render its conclusions indisputable.