A Crumbling Bastion

Flattery and Lies Won’t Save Vietnam

by Adrian Jaffe and Milton C. Taylor

Vice President Johnson’s characterization of President Ngo Dinh Diem of Vietnam as the “Churchill of today” is more than hyperbole. If it was sincerely meant, it is the kind of self-deception that has so often blinded us to truth. And its absurdity becomes immediately apparent when we recall what purposes the United States has hoped to further in Vietnam: (1) a stable, viable and democratic bastion of the Free World; (2) economic growth and a consequent improvement in the standard of living of the Vietnamese; and (3) an alternative to Communism. To these ends, we have given since 1955 approximately $1.4 billion in economic assistance and defense support, and about $500 million in military hardware. In comparison with $15.7 per capita of economic aid given Vietnam in 1960, Pakistan received $3.8 and India $1.9.

As of June, 1961, what has been accomplished? It must be said that Vietnam is not stable, not viable, not democratic and not a bastion. The instability of the government was demonstrated in the recent revolt against the regime in which an elite segment of the armed forces took part, a revolt which required, on the part of President Diem, stern repression and reprisal. The government is virtually unable to maintain security outside the city limits of Saigon. Communist Viet-Cong guerrillas effectively control most of the countryside, and within the past month President Kennedy has felt compelled to offer additional aid to increase the Army by 20,000 in order to prevent a complete rout.

Second, the Vietnamese Government is not viable, except insofar as it uses connivance and force to prolong its life. Nor is it democratic. The instability of the government was demonstrated in the recent revolt against the regime in which an elite segment of the armed forces took part, a revolt which required, on the part of President Diem, stern repression and reprisal. The government is virtually unable to maintain security outside the city limits of Saigon. Communist Viet-Cong guerrillas effectively control most of the countryside, and within the past month President Kennedy has felt compelled to offer additional aid to increase the Army by 20,000 in order to prevent a complete rout.

Vietnamese complain most bitterly about what they call “rule by family,” which is the lodging of nearly all policy and control of the government in a group of relatives. A checklist of the members of this group sets a modern-day record for nepotism: brother Ngo Dinh Nhu is the principal political adviser of the President and head of the 70,000 undercover members of the Can-Lao organization; Nhu’s wife is First Lady of the regime and leader of the organization of Vietnamese women; brother Ngo Dinh Can is Governor of Central Vietnam; brother Ngo Dinh Luyen is the Ambassador to London, Bonn and Brussels; Mrs. Nhu’s father, Tran Van Chuong, is Ambassador to Washington, Canada, Argentina and Brazil; and Mrs. Nhu’s mother represents Vietnam in the United Nations. Still another brother is the Roman Catholic bishop of Vinh Long.

True, there is little definitive proof of widespread corruption. How could there be, since there is no political opposition to expose venality and there is complete censorship of the press? But the stories are rife. A businessman will confide that he lost a government contract because his competitor made a higher pay-off;
an intellectual will relate the number of movie houses in Paris owned by Mrs. Ngo Dinh Nhu. Nor is Vietnam a bastion. Although Vietnamese troops have been trained by American officers and have American weapons, it is doubtful that the present Army could stave off a full-scale Communist attack from the North, since the North Vietnamese have double the number of troops. There are 150,000 men in the regular South Vietnam Army, 50,000 in the civil guard, and about 50,000 local militiamen, but these forces have not been able to impede the increasing activity of 7,000 to 15,000 Communist guerrillas in South Vietnam. Furthermore, even if the troops were loyal, and it is clear from the recent revolt that many of them are not; even if the troops were inspired by a deep love of their government, and many of them, in common with the civilians, are apathetic; even if the troops were violently opposed to Communism, and there is no evidence that they are fired up ideologically, they are not equipped and trained to fight a hit-and-run war in the rice paddies against the Viet-Cong.

Economic Development

What, then, of our effort to encourage economic growth? The system works this way: Vietnamese importers deposit piasters into a counterpart fund, receiving in turn foreign exchange advanced by the US; piasters in the counterpart fund are used by the Vietnamese Government for public expenditures. But in the history of counterpart fund operations, there are two revealing facts: First, of all goods imported by Vietnam under the commercial aid program, fully three-fourths have been consumer rather than capital goods. And, when the counterpart funds generated by these imports were spent by the Vietnamese Government, again about three-fourths were allocated to the maintenance of the Army.

Under the urgency to build up counterpart funds for the maintenance of the Vietnam Army, we have permitted the Vietnamese, with very few exceptions, to buy wherever they wish, and whatever they wish. There have been controls, but for legal and accounting purposes only. No one seems to have been too concerned that an undue number of imports fell into the category of luxury items, such as expensive automobiles, scooters, radios and typewriters. In 1958, Vietnam imported $34.3 million in textile products, more than the total imports ($50.3 million) of industrial equipment and machinery. In a country which must develop agricultural output in order to improve its foreign exchange earnings, a total of $5 million in fertilizers and insecticides was imported in 1958, less than the imports of private passenger vehicles ($7.8 million) or petroleum products ($6.9 million). Meanwhile, if the North Vietnamese are following the usual Communist policy, they are making a consumption sacrifice in the short run in order to stimulate capital growth.

As a result, it is apparent by visual observation (statistics on income are so inaccurate that they are meaningless) that American aid has created a nouveau riche of importers, contractors, government employees and commercial entrepreneurs. But the broad streets of Saigon, the villas of the government officials, and the luxurious restaurants do not reflect the standard of living of the people. In the rural areas where foreigners seldom go and are rarely admitted, the bulk of the population requires food, medicine, shelter and tools. There is little evidence to suggest that American aid has had an appreciable effect on the needs of these peasants. One American who undertook extensive research in the villages reported that most peasants were unaware of American aid. Of all the statistics that are distributed by the American Friends of Vietnam or the government's paid New York publicists, none deal with the incidence of leprosy, the number of unemployed, or the amount of malnutrition. Yet American relief workers in Vietnam report that the incidence of leprosy is one of the highest in the Orient, that the unemployed are conspicuous on the streets of Saigon, and that the poor filch food out of the garbage cans of the rich.

There is no dearth of other statistics which attempt to prove that Vietnam is in the vanguard of economic development in Asia. But these are purposely deceptive. We are told that rice exports in 1960 reached an all-time high since 1954, without at the same time being informed that these exports are not as high as under the French regime, even when allowance is made for exports from all of the former Indo-Chinese area. We are told that 1960 was a year of unprecedented economic recovery, but the $155 million trade deficit last year exceeded that of the year before.

Even in the narrow area in which economic development has been prosecuted, the US has been guilty of bad judgment and abnegation of responsibility. We know that a devaluation of the piaster would stimulate exports and restrict imports, but we have permitted it to be overvalued by 100 percent because the Vietnamese are concerned lest a change in the exchange rate result in a decrease in American aid. The US allocated 45 percent of all project aid from 1955 to 1960 for the development of highways and only 9 percent for agriculture, when the only real hope for a self-sustaining Vietnamese economy is to increase agricultural exports. We have sponsored such status symbols as a nuclear reactor when government offices can't even afford Scotch tape, and an electronic computer when reliable statistics are nonexistent and there is nothing to compute. Instead of promoting an intelligent development program, our basic approach in Vietnam is to sponsor
a multitude of piecemeal projects in diverse areas in the hope that they will add up to something in the end.

Our third aim, to prove that an alternative to Communism was possible and attainable, has about gone down the drain with the first two. While the Vietnamese Government conducts an unremitting anti-Communist campaign in the press, in its brainwashing classes and over its radio, it presents the Vietnamese people with a social order the effects of which are hardly distinguishable from those in North Vietnam. In neither North nor South Vietnam is there respect for the dignity of the individual. In many respects the South Vietnamese Government is less repressive and in some areas life in South Vietnam is less harsh, but it is a matter of so small a degree that instead of having created an example of non-Communism at work, we have illustrated how inept democracy can be. One of the most succinct and accurate statements of political conditions in Vietnam was provided by an American who lived in the villages for six months. After seeing how life was regimented by President Diem’s party, he said: “If the Communists ever take over this country, there will be very little that they will have to change.”

When the population sees little difference between Diem’s autocratic control and Communism, there is little will to defend the government. Communism may have no positive appeal, but there is also no militant urge to resist the guerrillas. Unless the mass of Vietnamese can identify themselves with the government, no amount of American military aid will hold back the Communists for long.

How Did It Happen?

How was it possible for us to make so many mistakes, over so long a period of time? The answer will not be found by investigating the CIA or by another Congressional inquiry. As a matter of fact, we have had many people who could have given us the facts. President Diem has not been surrounded only by the military, nor have his advisers all been cautious career men in the State Department worried about their ratings. We have sent to Vietnam, in large numbers, men of distinction in the academic and governmental worlds, professors and experts drawn from government agencies and from one of the great land grant universities. There have been some frauds and misfits, but the group has included an unusual number of able men, and there have been few days since 1955 when President Diem has not broken bread with at least one American PhD and on good days, three or four. One of President Diem’s personal advisers, paid mirabile dictu from his own funds, is one of the world’s leading experts in the field of agricultural reform, and the Vice President of Vietnam is learning English at present from an American Chief of Mission. Another adviser, a political scientist with a PhD, has made some 22 trips to the Far East, and has written an article entitled “Vietnam’s Democratic One-Man Rule.” But never in the history of our foreign affairs have we received more misinformation from a more qualified group.

Almost without exception, these advisers, experts and professors have told us less than the full truth. To some, no doubt, it has been a matter of not killing the ICA goose and of being sure of another tour of tax-free duty, with servants and social prestige. Others develop an affection for an environment which provides additional money, status and a sense of importance without at the same time requiring one to face the competitive rigors of the United States. With still others, it is a simple inability to see beyond appearances, or an unwillingness to offend, in a university, for example, the hierarchy of deans who might adversely affect future foreign assignments. In other cases, it is a matter of the police-precinct mind, to which all experience is uncomplicated. Whatever the motives, however, there has been unanimous and uniform distortion. What little truth has leaked out has come, not from official agencies and the professional experts, but
from a few journalists. To illustrate, in the contract between the Vietnamese Government and one US university, it is agreed that no materials, even personal research notes, may be used against the security or the interests of Vietnam. This constitutes a restriction on professional freedom which no university professor, including one who goes to Vietnam, would accept in the United States. When it was learned that an American press was about to publish some essays on Vietnam not entirely favorable to the regime, representations were made from Washington to defer the publication. When the American Embassy in Saigon publishes a news sheet, it follows the censored news of the captive local press down to the last sycophantic panegyric. When the United States Information Agency orders books for a library maintained for the Vietnamese people, it must carefully avoid those banned by the regime, like The Ugly American and The Quiet American. When the Vietnamese Government prevents students from going to America for university training, because of their alleged political unreliability, our cultural affairs office in Saigon meekly offers the scholarships to the chosen hacks and packs them off to America regardless of their scholastic aptitude. None of the hundreds of Vietnamese students studying in the United States is allowed to travel home through France because of the fear that they may not return.

But these are only minor illustrations. More important is the failure of most experts on Vietnam to publish an accurate, honest appraisal of the economic, social and political facts of life in this country and the flooding of most American newspapers and magazines with false praise. The other side, of course, is the failure to pay any heed whatsoever to those men and women who have returned from Vietnam with stories contrary to the party line. What the State Department cannot see, the university officials cannot hear. Indeed, such returning travelers are often ostracized because it is felt that they have lost their objectivity.

**Is the US Powerless?**

We stand at a curious point in history where morality and expediency coincide. The only argument for continuing our present policy, that it works, is nonsense, for it does not. Nor can we be confident that a Vietnamese Army of 170,000 can accomplish what an Army of 150,000 cannot. More military aid might help, but only if an appealing alternative to Communism is created — not the police state of Diem, not a disordered and unregulated economy. We must use our resources not to support lies and fakery, but to push forward a steady democratization of the nation. And we must do it. It is idle to say that Vietnam is independent. It is not. If history has catapulted us into a position of power, we should use the power to further democratic aims not only because these aims are worthwhile in themselves but because it is only through their realization that Communism can be kept in check. (In a direct communication to the authors, these thoughts were more eloquently expressed by an Asian, who wrote: “A change must come quickly, or it will be too late. The peasants may be illiterate but they realize that they are being cheated out of their basic human dignity in the name of freedom. If they see little difference between Diem and Communism, are they to be blamed if they don’t care who is the winner?”)

There is no reason Diem could not continue as President, provided he reforms his regime and broadens his political support. But if reform is to be construed by the Vietnamese people as real and not spurious, at least four changes would have to come about: (1) The family oligarchy must be dissolved with highest priority being assigned to the removal of the Nhu’s. (2) Diem must be prevailed upon to release his political opponents from jail, to tolerate their opposition, and to encourage their support and cooperation in the fight against Communism. (3) Certain basic freedoms must be introduced: namely freedom of the press, free elections, and freedom to travel. (4) Economic reform should be instituted by a conscientious effort of self-help, which would include a devaluation of the piaster, tax reform, the substitution of capital goods imports for luxury items, and the undertaking of a national development program. Nothing would be gained by supporting President Diem further if he were to oppose this order or reforms.

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**Ngo Dinh Diem**

In a Saigon where there is nothing else but politics [President Diem] represents at least an idea of patriotism. He has some words in common with Ho Chi Minh as Catholicism has some words in common with Communism, but he is separated from the people by cardinals and police cars with wailing sirens and foreign advisers droning of global strategy, when he should be walking in the rice fields unprotected, learning the hard way how to be loved and obeyed — the two cannot be separated. One pictured him there in the Norodom Palace, sitting with his blank brown gaze, incorruptible, obstinate, ill-advised, going to his weekly confession, bolstered up by his belief that God is always on the Catholic side, waiting for a miracle. The name I would write under his portrait is the Patriot Ruined by the West.
