

NYTimes (ND) FEB 24 1975

Vietnamese Nationalism

By Stephen B. Young

Aid to South Vietnam is a moral imperative as long as two propositions are true: First, a world where totalitarian regimes such as Hanoi's fail in their violent and disruptive efforts to impose their will on others is a just world; second, a world where each people can sustain a society protective of its highest ethical and social traditions is a world that gives due recognition to mankind's diversity and equality.

To weaken President Nguyen Van Thieu of South Vietnam at this juncture, no matter how disliked he is by some Americans, would violate those norms. This is not accepted by those who would like peace to descend immediately over Indochina at any cost. They deny that Mr. Thieu's Government validly represents the national aspirations of the Vietnamese people. Critics demand that he make further concessions to the Communists in the vain hope that from such concessions some middle ground around which effective peace can blossom will emerge between the warring factions.

But there is no neutral political middle in South Vietnam any more because Mr. Thieu's Government has enlisted the South Vietnamese people in the struggle to resist Hanoi. The Communists have been denied popular support. They do not deserve any concessions. Furthermore, last fall Mr. Thieu deftly outmaneuvered his non-Communist opposition of urban intellectuals. His opponents could not develop any substantial mass following. The war in South Vietnam now places Hanoi and Saigon eyeball-to-eyeball.

Once there was an alienated middle to Vietnam's politics, but it has been co-opted by Mr. Thieu because of his tacit alliance with the secret *Tan Dai Viet* nationalist political party and of the reforms that have resulted from that alliance.

Since 1968, Mr. Thieu has presided while a social order consistent with the highest Vietnamese ethical value of *phuc duc* has been created.

Phuc duc demands that each individual Vietnamese be given an opportunity to lead a virtuous life, to receive the personal prosperity that comes as a reward for virtue, and to achieve a status commensurate with his innate, heaven-bestowed abilities.

Communism, a Western ideology, makes no room for *phuc duc*. The blood feud between Communists and

nationalists in Vietnam is a consequence of this conflict of values. Acquiescence in Communist gains is morally repugnant to the nationalists.

The distribution of land, the decentralization of power to village councils, the opening of local politics to every faction save the Communists and the diminution of the power of the corrupt Saigon rich have brought South Vietnam into closer conformity with *phuc duc* and have transformed its politics.

The *Tan Dai Viets*, who have led this transformation, are a secret brotherhood of some 30,000 members. In national elections they can count on upward of 800,000 votes for their candidates. Party members administer the best programs and lead the best units of Mr. Thieu's Government and army. The party aspires to a democratic socialism for South Vietnam. It is the only group of Vietnamese to have combined the traditional value of *phuc duc* with meaningful 20th century achievement.

The party is largely unknown to Americans. Only two Westerners are known to have copies of the *Tan Dai Viet* political manifesto, *Dan Toc Sinh Ton*.

This fact reveals a distressing failure of American scholarship and American journalism. The antiwar movement has grown up benighted. While our support for South Vietnam began in 1954 with an independent assessment of nationalism in that country, critics relied on French impressions to argue that there was no nationalism there and that our involvement was either hopeless or immoral. To this day, leading antiwar leaders have assumed along with the French that Vietnam is a Confucian society patterned on Chinese lines where nationalism cannot exist apart from Communism and class struggle.

Such an assumption is false. The Vietnamese have a unique, non-Chinese tradition centered on *phuc duc*. Nationalism, the pride of being Vietnamese, is essential to that tradition. The *Tan Dai Viets* and others embody that tradition.

We must support South Vietnam to succor its nationalist spirit, to make good the damage our ignorance has already inflicted and to try in some small way to increase the decency of our world.

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