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Generals Register With Old Enemy

Explain Personal Aspirations in New South Vietnam

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SAIGON—"It's absolutely normal," said the distinguished-looking old lady in the gray silk ao dai, "quite to be expected and quite straightforward. All he has to do is to go in there and fill in a form and talk to the officers."

She was referring to her husband, a South Vietnamese general. Peering through the glass we could see him, a white-haired old man, sitting at a desk talking to a Communist officer. There were many others poring over their forms there in, ironically, one of the examination halls of Saigon University.

The new authorities here have begun the inevitable process of registration, enumeration and examination of all those connected with the old regime.

Each day the radio announces a new category of officers or civil servants who are asked to present themselves at special centers where their names and other details will be taken down. First to be called were generals and senators and deputies; now colonels and civil servants are going in. The first ministry to be egistered is the Ministry of Justice.

Outside the examination hall—once some kind of American installation, to judge by its architecture—crowds of colonels and other officers are waiting and talking. Some have not seen one another for weeks and had presumed each other dead or gone to America.

"One good thing is that we see so many of our friends here for the first time. It's good to know that they are safe and sound," said a colonel who had been on the staff of the 3d Military Region.

Col. My was in civilian clothes like all the others, a large mass of rather big, solid-looking men wearing dark trousers and, usually, white shirts over their trousers. Col. My, however, wore a yellow shirt. "Here's the form," he said. "The first thing it says is that you must fill it in sincerely. Then it asks for details of your career and whether you studied abroad."

The colonel, who had indeed spent a year at Ft. Benning, the U.S. Army infantry school, in 1966, told us all this in French. Like many people in Saigon he has conveniently forgotten his English, which is a language one rarely hears any more except from Provisional Revolutionary Government officials.

The final question on the form, like one of those sophisticated job applications, asks the applicant's hopes and aspirations for the future. "I am going to put simply that I want to serve my country in any way that I can," said the colonel.

Soon it will be the turn of majors and captains to register, and the Saigon authorities have made it clear that they are particularly concerned that officers from the former government's elite units, the paratroopers, marines and rangers, should report promptly. "Maybe it's a kind of flattery," said one officer, "or maybe it means trouble or perhaps reeducation."

Asked about reeducation, Col. My said, "I suppose it's very probable. After all it's what we did with them when they came in as Chieu Hoi (defectors). And now we are the Chieu Hoi. But there are a lot of us."

The colonel was right. Only a fraction of the South Vietnamese officer corps, which probably numbered about 80,000 officers from generals to lieutenants, left the country with the Americans. Many had no opportunity to leave, and some who did chose to stay. So there they all are now at the reporting center in Cholon sitting at the students' desks like schoolboys and hoping for a good mark.

But many politicians did not leave, either. The senators and deputies were also reporting. At the National Assembly, now a military headquarters, they waited on the steps — smartly dressed men with polished shoes and expensive sports shirts.

Deputy Pham Duy Tre, a 34-year-old schoolteacher who represented a constituency near Saigon, said he believed that only about 10 deputies had left out of 159 and only about five senators out of 60. In spite of the fact that he was a member of the pro-Thieu bloc, he had decided not to leave.

"I believe we'll probably be all right," he said, "but I don't think it will be possible to go back to teaching. That's too sensitive a job for them. Maybe we will have to be reeducated ourselves."

A retired army officer who was a senator said, "I don't think we were deceived about the military situation. At least we knew it was bad. But we did believe that the liberation side wanted to negotiate and that there would be a mixed regime. That was a very big mistake.

"I could have left, but my family is very big. I couldn't have taken them all. Anyway, I was so completely disgusted with the Americans. I couldn't swallow them any more."

How far this process of sorting the population into the sheep—no strong connections with the old regime—and the goats will go is unclear. The soldiers at the examination center felt that the most dangerous jobs to confess to were military security, military intelligence, provincial reconaissance units (anti-Vietcong assasination squads) and military police.

And the national police—there were 120,000 of them—are obviously not in a good position, either. But what, if anything, will happen to ordinary officers, politicians and civil servants nobody knows. It is not a question of shooting or imprisonment—most seem to think that unlikely—but of whether they can have jobs and be part of society.

Col. My said he was thinking of trying to become a farmer. The medical senator who was a specialist at one of Saigon's big hospitals thought he would become a country doctor.

Many civil servants just beginning to go through the registration process seem to expect that they will be able to go on as civil servants, although perhaps losing rank.

Even with the lightest hand from the new authorities, all these people are obviously going to have a difficult time. But then the same would be true if they had taken off for America. And the constant stress on reconciliation and concord has confirmed many in their choice to stay.

"I was born in this country," said Col. My, "It's my country. I prefer to die here rather than in some foreign place."