

Guy Wright

Concrete Evidence

Maybe we are getting our men out of Vietnam, but we are still putting our money in.

And we are doing it in a way that suggests we expect to have some say-so there for a long time to come.

Evidence of that comes from an American construction man in Saigon.

If such a source of information strikes you as unorthodox, let me set you straight.

American overseas construction workers are a breed apart. There are thousands of them scattered around the globe. In fact, there's hardly a country where you won't find them.

Often they know more about what's going on than our generals and diplomats.

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THEY KNOW the sidestreets and back alleys. They deal with working people, not politicians. They are immune to fancy phrases. They can't afford to kid themselves.

They are one of our best — and most overlooked — intelligence sources.

In my travels, when I want a quick reading on a foreign country, I seek out the American construction workers there. They tell me down-to-earth things I would never pick up courting the embassy set.

And so my friend in Saigon sent me this dope about a new deal in the works.

For the first time our Navy has awarded a lump sum contract for a highway building project to a Vietnamese construction firm.

(I should explain that the Navy handles all our construction business in Vietnam, no matter what the purpose.)

By our standards this road job is no great shakes — five miles of two-lane blacktop along a canal near the delta town of Can Tho.

The main trick will be to pack enough aggregate under it to keep it from sinking into the delta ooze.

Uncle Sam will furnish the aggregate

and give the Vietnamese contractor \$1.8 million to do the work.

He was the lowest of five Vietnamese bidders. No American bids were allowed.

The agreement grants the Vietnamese firm 32 months to finish the job.

"I could do it alone in three months," my friend wrote derisively.

But my purpose isn't to cast aspersions on Vietnamese construction ability.

To me the fascinating thing is that our Navy evidently expects it will still have officers in Vietnam 32 months from now to inspect the completed work and accept or reject it.

What's more, as the first of its kind this contract "will serve as a test for Vietnamese contractors," a Navy captain explained. If it works out well, future highway construction projects will be awarded the same way.

All this suggests that the Navy expects to be in the building business in Vietnam far into the future.

And that's flatly at odds with the expectation of many observers, including me, that once our troops are withdrawn, a Communist takeover will be swift and certain.

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IN FACT, I've thought all along that President Nixon's real problem was one of timing — to finish the withdrawal in time to reap the benefits in the election next November but not so soon that the Communists have made hash of his "Vietnamization" boasts by then.

The road-building deal suggests someone really expects the Saigon regime to survive.

What's more, my friend sent word that the Japanese government is lending money to build an electrical power plant at the same town of Can Tho.

The Japanese world hardly do that if they thought a Communist victory was imminent.

I hope they are right and I am wrong.