

NYTimes JUL 8 1972

For Whom We Fight

By ANTHONY LEWIS

PARIS—Ngo Cong Duc, 36 years old, is a Roman Catholic from a prominent family in South Vietnam's delta. The ranking Catholic prelate in Vietnam, Archbishop Binh, is a relative. Mr. Duc's father was assassinated in 1953 by the Communist-led revolutionaries. He has been a Saigon newspaper editor and a member of the National Assembly.

Altogether, it would be hard to find a more perfect symbol of the people that the United States says it is defending in South Vietnam. Ngo Cong Duc would seek to justify the reasons we give for carrying on the war: to prevent a Communist "bloodbath" and the extinction of democracy. And so it is startling to learn what Mr. Duc really feels about the American role in his country.

He is understandably somewhat skeptical on the subject of democracy in Saigon. In last fall's Assembly election, Time magazine said he was so popular that he would be "an odds-on favorite in any fair election." But he was physically assaulted, his poll-watchers arrested, his votes evidently not counted. Why? Because he was opposed to President Thieu. Last October he slipped out of South Vietnam, leaving his wife and son behind.

As Mr. Duc sees the political problem of South Vietnam, the United States is preventing necessary compromise and adjustment—by single-handedly keeping President Thieu in power. He put it in a phrase: "Thieu survives on B-52's, that is all."

But his feelings about America in Vietnam go much deeper than politics. He spoke of them here the other day

AT HOME ABROAD

"The destruction of Vietnam is only an incidental fact."

in a gentle voice that did not conceal his emotion.

"The Americans say they want to stop a bloodbath," Mr. Duc said, "but we get a bloodbath from them every day.

"It is very hard for me or for any Vietnamese to explain the way we feel about the American method of fighting this war—the bombs, the defoliants, the napalm." He searched for a word in English. "It is . . . barbarism.

"The American Government knows all this, but I do not believe the American people ever wished these things to happen to the Vietnamese."

He has not always felt that way about the United States in Vietnam.

"When the Americans came," he said, "I thought they were coming to keep the South out of the hands of the Communists. We thought we would have freedom, democracy. So we were glad to see them.

"But later on, with the experience of living with the Americans in South Vietnam, we saw that all these things were contrary. They come not for freedom, for democracy, but for imperialism."

His last word was so startling that the interviewer asked: Did he really believe that?

"All Vietnamese do," Mr. Duc replied firmly. "Even the officers fighting now, even the newspapers owned by refugees from the North say so."

Americans who see South Vietnam without official blinders often discover the attitudes articulated by Ngo Cong Duc. An extraordinary book to be published shortly in the United States explains why they exist. It is "Fire in the Lake," by Frances FitzGerald,

which The New Yorker has just started to serialize. The subtitle is: "The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam."

With powerful conviction, Miss FitzGerald details what the United States has done in South Vietnam. Our transformation of the war into a technologists' testing-ground has made more than a quarter of the population refugees. In seven years a nation of land and villages has become one of tin-shack Hoovervilles and army camps.

"The land and the family were the two sources of national as well as personal identity," Miss FitzGerald says. "The Americans have destroyed these sources for many Vietnamese not merely by killing people but by forcibly separating them, by removing the people from the land and depositing them in the vast swamp cities." She concludes that what is involved is not just physical destruction by bombs and shells but "the destruction of an entire society."

That book's factual analysis explains why Ngo Cong Duc, a Catholic democrat, uses the word "imperialism." He does not mean it in Disraeli's sense, signifying acquisition of territory. He means something simpler: that the United States does what it does in Vietnam for its own purposes, not for the sake of the Vietnamese.

It would at least reduce hypocrisy if more Americans could admit that to themselves—admit that the life and death of the Vietnamese hardly enter into our calculations. We are there to demonstrate our own power, and the destruction of Vietnam is only an incidental fact. To us.