

# Saigon Commanders Say the War Can Last

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SAIGON, South Vietnam, Aug. 14—Provided that American support of the war effort here is not radically reduced by Congress or the election to the Presidency of Senator George McGovern, South Vietnamese commanders foresee an indefinite military conflict with Hanoi that could last years or decades.

To most of the commanders, peace negotiations in any form seem to have value only as propaganda and are of only peripheral interest.

In private conversations, many of Saigon's highest military leaders see a more or less permanent state of war in Vietnam as not only possible, but also highly probable.

"It is a popular belief in Western nations that no country can wage war for such periods, but we have already proved the contrary," one said.

## Troops Called Durable

"For that matter, 'he went on,' there is a notion in the West that no soldier can stand up under more than 72 hours of continuous close combat without a rest in reserve. We have shown at Anloc and countless other places that it isn't true for the Vietnamese."

There are many policy dis-

agreements in South Vietnam's officer corps and sometimes bitter personal disputes. But these men do share many opinions that they express freely in conversation, although they decline public attribution.

Among the thoughts most commonly expressed, evidently reflecting official thinking at the highest level, are these:

¶Regardless of what happens in Paris or elsewhere, the Communists will never settle for anything less than outright military victory.

¶The Communist side can and will continue fighting as it has done during the last decade, despite the staggering losses it has sustained. Commanders here see no possibility that Soviet and Chinese aid to Hanoi can be completely halted by any military means, and they feel that the Communists continue to learn from their tactical and strategic mistakes.

¶South Vietnam, as things now stand, cannot achieve military victory over the North.

Such a victory, however it might be disguised by diplomatic language, would be wholly unacceptable to South Vietnamese commanders, even if the alternative is permanent war.

¶It is assumed that the Communists "We shall never be able to increase the million men we now have under arms," a senior commander said, "and we are

stuck with the current balance of forces, which was undeniably weakened by the departure of American ground forces."

¶On the other hand, the Communists can be denied victory in the South, if the United States is willing to balance each fresh technological advance by the other side with a comparable increase in its own firepower.

¶The departure of the bulk of American servicemen from Vietnam and the current political crisis in the future American support role here have had a somewhat detrimental effect on fighting morale. But paradoxically, there is also a feeling of relief among many Vietnamese, including senior officers, that the alien and by no means entirely congenial influence of the Americans has been reduced.

¶The election of Senator McGovern would be, in the words of the commanders, "nothing short of disaster for us." If American support were completely withdrawn, some say, the Communists could win in a matter of weeks.

The last estimate does not speak well for President Nixon's program of "Vietnamization" of the war, but Vietnamese officers have never liked the term anyway. They regard the very word as an insulting misnomer implying that a paternalistic

senior partner considers Saigon ready to take over something that was its own in the first place.

## Scorn for Advisory Effort

Many Vietnamese officers, while grateful for American material support over the years, scarcely conceal their scorn for much of the advisory effort.

"This is an unconventional war even when the Communists use conventional weapons," an officer said. "They move and conceal their artillery in ways scarcely imaginable by a conventional army. They used tanks around Tchepone in Laos effectively in terrain regarded by Americans as totally unsuitable for tanks.

"I am not a proud man," the officer continued, "and I have always been ready to take advice from my American counterpart. But I think you must agree that over the years we have had more to teach our advisers than the other way around."

## Bigger but Little Change

In 10 years of vast American help, the Vietnamese Army has grown in size and has acquired countless new weapons and technology.

But, all things considered, it seems little changed from what it was before the Americans came.

It is still an essentially road-bound, conventional force. Its soldiers and officers still think mainly in terms of long-term survival rather than high-risk battles.

Ranking Vietnamese leaders concede that there is a morale and leadership problem in the army. These reached crisis proportions early in May with the rout of various units in Quang-tri, Kontum and Bindinh provinces, among other places. But they argue that there have always been such problems, and ascribe some of the fault to American policies.

"It did not help when our troops were in tight corners and saw the American advisers getting out on helicopters," one officer said. "We realize that it was a matter of policy and that the Nixon Administration was insisting that American casualties be kept down. But it really hurt the Vietnamese soldiers' will to fight."

*for Years*

### Complaint About Weapons

Vietnamese commanders also resent the fact that Washington has supplied them with new weapons only after the Communists have introduced similar weapons.

Such arguments do not alter the fact that with roughly equal numbers of men on both sides, if the South Vietnamese Army was not helped by American support it could be beaten quickly by the Communists.

South Vietnamese officers

candidly concede that part of the reason is that senior leaders still tend to be appointed on political grounds rather than combat proficiency.

Another explanation offered on the shortcomings of the Saigon forces in relation to the Communists is the American training, which has been criticized as unsuitable for the type of war here.

### Lack of Motivation

But perhaps the greatest handicap has been the relative lack of motivation of the South Vietnamese soldier compared with the soldier in a Communist unit—a deficiency conceded by South Vietnamese officers.

An aspect of this problem was illustrated recently in the heavy fighting around Quangtri and in other areas. A number of Communist prisoners told interrogators they knew of entire North Vietnamese units that would be willing to surrender except for fear of the political commissars assigned to them.

The commissar in a North Vietnamese or Vietcong unit has enormous authority, partly because of the primacy of the party in all matters, and partly because he reports directly to his party superiors, short-circuiting the conventional military command structure.

"Can you imagine one man having that kind of hold on any South Vietnamese unit?" an officer said. "If a Saigon unit wanted to give up and one officer opposed it, the men would just shoot him and go about their business."

### System Was Tried

Actually, South Vietnamese senior officers respect the political commissar system, and say that it has been tried here, too.

"That was basically what was behind the introduction of Chinese Nationalist advisers from Taiwan here," he said.

"Taiwan is run by the Kuomintang, a party structured very much like the Communist. The [Nationalist] Army, like the Communists, has political commissars at all levels, and we felt they could help us introduce the system here," he added.

"But the trouble was we lacked a single party anything like either the Communist or the Kuomintang. Without a monolithic national party structure you can't make a political commissar system work."

In any case, there is a feeling that the present mold of the war cannot be changed much now. The time for theory and innovation, it is felt, is long past.

At best, the vista from here, short of Communist victory, is one of the endless drudgery of war.