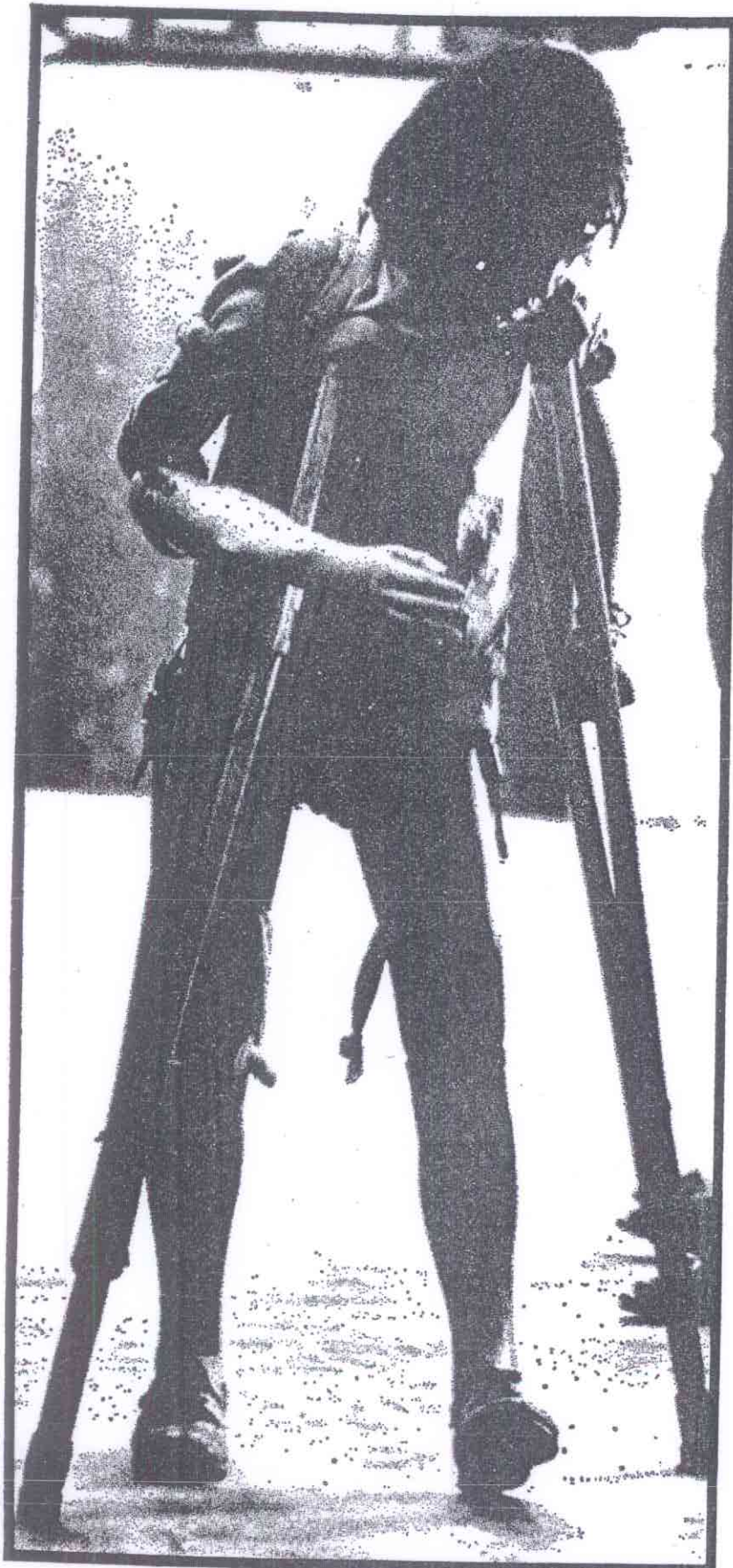

The Surplus Children



of South Vietnam

By Chester L. Cooper

The terrace of Saigon's Hotel Continentale is one of the few constants in the capital's kaleidoscopic physical and human landscape. In the late afternoon and on into the evening, the good and the evil sit cheek by jowl sipping and nibbling, buying and selling, drinking and brooding. The players change, but the cast is always the same—foreign soldiers, local hustlers, expatriate Frenchmen, world-weary newsmen. Along the side and rear walls are the prostitutes—male, female and indeterminate. And shuffling around from table to table are the beggars and the pushers. The mood music is a melange of turned-up rock, flatulent Honda, occasional siren.

Two "regulars" recently provided a leitmotif. Big Bob and Little Babe met each afternoon after Big Bob finished pushing papers or driving a truck or doing whatever he did at MAC-V, the Pentagon East. At about 5:30, khaki shirt stained and black face streaked with the sweat of the hot afternoon, he would lumber up to the terrace, look sternly at the score or so of street kids running and shrieking after any soft-looking touch, and shout: "Where's my date?" And then out of the crowd would emerge Little Babe. Barefoot, scruffy, scrawny, 7-going-on-30.

"Hi, Little Babe!" and a hug. A scream of joy and skinny arms embracing enormous thighs.

Across the terrace they went, and into the dank men's room rich with the aroma of decades of urine. Bob would scrub 24 hours' accumulation of street grime from Babe's face and hands and run his comb through her matted hair. Hand in hand, they went back to the terrace and to their table in the shade. And then, to the music of her giggles and his belly-laugh, Little Babe had her ice cream, cookies and milk and Big Bob his beer. A peck on the cheek and Babe would be off to her home, the street, and Bob disappeared into the crowded square—until 5:30 tomorrow.

Big Bob has long since returned to the States—hopefully, to a houseful of giggling little girls. Little Babe? Who knows?

Babe has at least a hundred thousand counterparts in Saigon and Hue and Danang. There are probably 50,000 Babes, courtesy of three million G.I.'s who passed through during the last decade. Some, the lucky ones, are in the few Vietnamese orphanages; most, like Babe, live on the streets. They provide an unbroken link with the wretched progeny of the French Foreign Legion and the Japanese

Imperial Army. Together with the orphaned, the abandoned and the lost they comprise a pathetic legacy of the American struggle to provide the Vietnamese with free choice and a miserable souvenir of peace with honor.

Voluntary agencies have been doing what they can in South Vietnam. And thousands of compassionate Big Bobs have brought a moment of laughter to thousands of miserable youngsters. But the voluntary agencies, as well meaning and effective as they are, are not adequate for the job—and the Big Bobs have all gone home.

In North Vietnam the problem must be quite different in both scale and kind. Even under the fury of bombing, the Hanoi Government probably had some minimal organized arrangements for coping with lost, strayed, orphaned or abandoned youngsters. At least, visitors do not report them drifting around the streets of Hanoi or Haiphong. And, of course, during the last decade or so, the North has been spared the thousands of offspring of Vietnamese women and foreign troops. But, surely, there must be a problem of substantial dimensions; a country as poor as North Vietnam cannot experience years of war without being overwhelmed by maimed, fatherless, sick, frightened and homeless children.

Highly motivated American officials, at this very moment, are wrestling with the problem of programs and modalities for postwar assistance to both North and South Vietnam. Perhaps the sordid terrace of the Hotel Continentale can help us get our priorities straight. Little Babe comes first—the bridges and the roads and the rail lines of North and South Vietnam will, sooner or later, one way or another, be rebuilt.

What we must do, if we are serious about a "lasting peace," is to concentrate on the Vietnamese people rather than on the Vietnamese things.

Schools, mental health clinics, pediatric services, vocational training centers, orphanages, teacher training, foster-parent programs, remedial education are but a few of the objectives of a five-year, children-oriented aid effort. The program, of course, should be wholly Vietnamese in character, not American. We have learned, or we should have learned, that we cannot and, indeed, should not, try to export our own standards and values.

The most expeditious way of accomplishing the task of salvaging a generation of young Vietnamese would be to turn over the major part of our aid directly to UNICEF, which is already operating in South Vietnam.

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