

Vietnam: 'What Remains Is the Basic Structure of a Feudal Society'

Two incidents which were reported recently and which seem to have escaped editorial comment illustrate graphically the total failure of U.S. policy toward Vietnam. In the first instance, the South Vietnamese National Assembly voted overwhelmingly to amend the Constitution in order to allow President Thieu to run for a heretofore forbidden third term. Secondly, and at the same time, it was reported that in the rural areas of South Vietnam, villages were being called in by government authorities and made to surrender the titles to their land, given to them under the widely publicized government land reform program in the early 1970s. The land was now being returned to the original landowners and the land reform program was, in some areas, largely revoked.

When the U.S. first deployed troops to South Vietnam in 1965, the mission assigned was a limited one, that of preventing defeat of the South Vietnamese Army and government by the Communist insurgency which was being abetted by the power of North Vietnam. The arrival of significant numbers of American troops and aircraft soon turned the tide of battle. Defeat was prevented. The American objective was then expanded to a more positive one, that of "allowing the South Vietnamese to choose their own government without outside interference." Lip service was given to a "Revolutionary Development" program which was to bring a social revolution to the countryside, "with the hearts and minds of the people," and

gain their active support for a government interested in their welfare and responsive to their needs.

A Constitution was written for South Vietnam and democratic elections were held. Civic action projects, largely planned, financed, and constructed by Americans, sprang up all over the countryside of South Vietnam. Although the resources devoted to civic action and Revolutionary Development were meager in comparison to those devoted to the military effort, they were not small and these programs had significant results in localities where a dedicated Vietnamese district chief or province chief implemented and administered them with initiative, vigor, and honesty.

As the culmination of these otherwise generally shallow efforts at social reform, the United States, after much pressure, finally in 1970 cajoled the South Vietnamese Government into implementing an extensive land reform program which provided title to the land to those who actually occupied and worked it.

Here finally was one program which seemed capable of altering the traditional social structure in the rural areas by establishing a new class of independent land-owning peasantry.

But apart from land reform, most of these projects in the end were superficial. The basic structure of South Vietnamese society and government was not disturbed. Indeed, corruption and graft increased and became more open and flagrant as the rewards for such actions grew with the tremendous influx of

American money and material. The privileged continue to prosper, to buy their way out of the Army or to buy safe assignments and rapid promotion. The posts of province chief and district chief, vital links in the effort to tie the government to the people, were the most lucrative and sought-after posts for venal officials and assignment to those posts was purchased at high cost. In a few rare cases, where the corruption became too flagrant for the Americans to tolerate, the offending Vietnamese official was transferred and replaced by one more subtle or less greedy. The government continued to appear to the rural population of South Vietnam as remote, corrupt, and feudal.

So the endless and spectacular American military victories over the North Vietnamese and Vietcong could never be translated into political gains for the South Vietnamese Government. When American forces withdrew from an area, the enemy again found shelter, or at least passive acquiescence at their presence, from the rural population of South Vietnam. The people remained alienated from a remote and corrupt government which offered them nothing.

As the American effort in South Vietnam began to be reduced subsequent to the initiation of the Vietnamization program, the South Vietnamese Government of President Thieu found it increasingly less necessary to prolong the facade of government reform and democratic process which the Americans had felt to be so important. American lever-

age which had never been widely used in any case, was vastly diminished. Thus, in the last presidential election Thieu was able to coerce all opposition out of the race and, despite protests by his American mentors, run and be elected as the sole candidate. The American-nurtured and -sponsored democratic process, so alien to the feudal Vietnamese society, was short-lived indeed.

The social reforms imposed upon this society also lasted only so long as American money and influence. With the apparent repudiation of land reform as reported last week, the facade of social reform and of a government devoted to the welfare of the mass of its rural population, also crumbled.

As the jungle reclaims American firebases and support installations and as the visible evidence of the American intervention in Vietnam is dismantled and fades away, what remains is the basic structure of a feudal Vietnamese society much as it has existed for centuries. The privileged urban and land-owning class, claiming their Mandarin heritage, rule for their own benefit with little regard for the plight, condition, or welfare of the peasant masses. The government remains remote, inefficient, unrepresentative and corrupt. The vast American expenditure of treasure and of lives has, finally, left nothing of permanence in South Vietnam.

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