

Forging the Post-Vietnam Era

The writer is co-director of the Indochina Resource Center, a Protestant-sponsored private research group whose aim is Indochinese peace. He met in Paris from April 6-8 and again last week with Dinh Ba Thi, who heads the Provisional Revolutionary Government's delegation there and with Madame Phan Thi Minh, a delegation member.

By Fred Branfman

WASHINGTON—The coming months are among the most historic of this generation. For the Vietnam war, the seminal experience of the post-1945 era, is ending. President Nguyen Van Thieu's resignation raises hopes that war will conclude relatively peacefully. If the Ford Administration continues to support his policies, however, there can still be a bloody finale that will haunt us for decades.

In my talks in Paris, the Provisional Revolutionary Government, known to many Americans as the Vietcong, projected the following scenario for a peace agreement.

1. A new Saigon administration that replaced the Thieu Government must be seriously committed to the Paris agreement.
2. Talks must begin immediately in South Vietnam to bring about a cease-fire, demarcation of military lines, democratic liberties, and the National Council of National Reconciliation and Concord, called for in the Paris accord.
3. The United States should cease its intervention by stopping all military aid and withdrawing all paramilitary personnel, although a normal United States Embassy and American businessmen and relief workers could remain.

The P.R.G. made it clear that it would not accept talks with a successor to Mr. Thieu, such as Nguyen Cao Ky, who has already stated he will continue the war. It will not accept a replacement who continues to demand United States military aid

to augment existing stockpiles or balks at releasing political prisoners.

Aid from international organizations like the United Nations or International Committee of the Red Cross will be welcome. The question of departure of Vietnamese for abroad, the P.R.G. said, should come up during and after negotiations, since Article 11 of the Paris agreement permits all Vietnamese freedom of residence and movement.

There seems little reason to doubt that the P.R.G. would accept such a settlement. If the United States supports a Saigon side unwilling to follow such a political scenario, however, there is every reason to believe the P.R.G. and North Vietnamese will intensify military pressure. This could involve attacks aimed at destroying South Vietnamese troops deployed around Saigon, a take-over of the Mekong Delta and siege of Saigon, and a direct attack on Saigon itself.

Most non-Communist Vietnamese would clearly prefer the political route. Gen. Duong Van Minh ("Big" Minh to many Americans), for example, recently said, "I think the other side is looking for a political solution," and promised to negotiate peace if he should replace Mr. Thieu.

Unlike what happened in 1954, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Saigon, Nguyen Van Binh, has called upon Catholics to remain in areas captured by the Communists. Eight Catholic bishops have already chosen to stay, including Bishops Pham Ngoc Chi in Danang, Nguyen Kim Dien who traveled on foot to return to Hue just before it was to fall, Nguyen Van Hoa in Ban Me Thuot, and Huynh Van Nghi who rushed to Phan Thiet when it was about to fall.

The Buddhists, who instructed their followers to stay in their strongholds of Danang and Hue have already entered into leadership positions in the "People's Revolutionary Committees" administering these cities. These include Pham Xuan Huy, a popular

National Assembly deputy from Danang.

It is crucial now that the Ford Administration seize the opportunity of Mr. Thieu's resignation to move for the kind of political settlement outlined by the P.R.G. and supported by Buddhists and Catholics alike. For not only are tens of thousands of lives at stake; so, too, is the pace at which this country moves into a new, post-Vietnam, era.

In making a transition to a new era, there is no better place to start than Indochina. The North Vietnamese, P.R.G., Pathet Lao and Khmer Rouge are symbols, as are no others, of a new world we must accept. Reconstruction aid to them will also fulfill a moral imperative to help rebuild what we destroyed, a legal obligation incurred to Vietnam under Article 21 of the Paris agreement.

There is no doubt that the quickest path to international stability lies in accepting the world as it will be, instead of trying to hold back the tides of history. Our ability to take this path, however, will in large part depend on what happens in Saigon in the next few months.