WXPost MAY 11 1975

A Nation Reunited With Its History

By Frances FitzGerald

The writer, whose book, "Fire in the Lake," was published in 1972, visited Hanoi early this year.

IT ENDED so abruptly. The Saigon government with its million men under arms, the Americans with their computers, their intelligence networks and their billion-dollar and programs disappeared from Vietnam as if they had been ripped like the words on the plastic of child's magic slate. The war stopped; there was silence in the airports; new flags flew in the streets. A day later Ambassador Graham Martin was discovered, haggard, eating an apple on a ship somewhere in the South China Sea.

The war ended so quickly that the history of Vietnam seemed flung off its tracks into the unpredictable. It was not, of course. It is just that Vietnamese rhythms are different. For in many ways the war was all continuity and repetition, and the end of it—this particular end—was for 20 or 30 years as inevitable as the fall of Valhalla in Wagner's "Ring."

True, the war has changed a great deal in South Vietnam. The Vietnamese have lost a generation of young men; their farmland has been plowed by bombs, their forests stripped to a permanent, chemical winter, their population uprooted and spilled from the countryside into the cities and towns. The vast majority of adult men have served the Saigon government and/or worked for the Americans. Villages are divided, and there is hardly a family on one side or the other without blood on its hands. And yet in many ways the war has changed nothing; it has merely delayed what was to come. Many of the new questions are the old ones held in abeyance, and their resolution will be the same as it would have been in 1965, in 1954 or even in 1945 had there been no foreign intervention in Vietnam.

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The continuity lies in the continued existence of the revolutionary movement in the South. American officials have always maintained that the Vietcong was nothing but an arm of Hanoi; the North Vietnamese have said that there is only one Vietnam, and the Liberation Front in the South was but the other half of a national revolutionary movement. The perspectives are different, but the two claims are not wholly contradictory, for the facts behind both of them are the same.

Before the regular American troops came into the war in 1965, the southern guerrillas had on their own all but defeated the American-backed Saigon regime. The American divisions decimated the guerrillas by destroying the very society from which they came and brought the northern troops into the war.

Still, since 1971 the Liberation Front has shown a regenerative capacity equal to that of the earthworm. By 1973, when the Paris peace accord was signed, it was governing large areas of the countryside in much the same way as it had in the early '60s, and, as became clear to reporters at that time, many of the people in Saigon-controlled zones still belonged to the alternate society, the alternate culture that it had created alongside that of the government. Its program, much of it written into the political articles of the Paris peace accord, was very little changed from the manifesto it had written at the time of its foundation in 1960. It is this program and this alternate society that will shape the future of the South.

No Sign of "Bloodbath"

FOR YEARS American officials have predicted that the Communists, if they won, would massacre millions of people in cold blood. But the prediction was never founded in reality.

In the first place, the Liberation Front was a revolutionary movement—that is, inclusive rather than exclusive. Its goal was not the conquest of one part of society—as in a civil war—but the enfolding of all Vietnamese within its own structure. In the second place its armed forces were extraordinarily disciplined—their behavior in Hue in 1968 may be the exception that proves the rule—and their guerrillas economical in their use of violence for political ends.

Having achieved victory, the revolutionaries may try and execute, or simply kill, a number of former officials and former American agents; in certain areas there may be considerable public pressure on them to do just that. But it is extremely unlikely that they will conduct a large-scale bloodbath. Their stated policy is that of reconciliation, and their actions over the past month have indicated that they were sincere in proclaiming it.

According to the many foreign observers who watched the transition in Danang and Saigon, the Provisional Revolutionary Government and North Vietnamese troops behaved impeccably, restoring both cities to order a day or two after they invested them. A week after the terrible panic in the Danang airport, when the ARVN troops mobbed the last departing planes, the city was functioning normally: churches were open, children were back in school and the markets were busy. In Saigon and in Danang former municipal officials and traffic police signed up for jobs with the new government.

Three weeks after the ARVN surrender, Europeans in Danang said that the new regime had demoted some people—the principal of one high school, for instance, had ended up as a school teacher—but that there had been no reprisals that they knew about. One French reporter had the odd experience of talking with the former police chief of Hoian City (the capital of Quangnam province) and hearing him confess to having tortured political prisoners "but only a bit"; mysteriously, the man was sitting in his old office, talking conversationally.

Forming a Government

THE LEADERSHIP of the revolutionary government has not yet surfaced except as a series of military and administrative committees. What will probably emerge in the next week or so is a coalition composed partly of the old leadership of the NLF and the PRG, partly of members of the old Front alliance groups and partly of Third Force representatives, including, perhaps, Gen. Duong Van Minh.

The Communists will undoubtedly take the leading role in the new government, but the non-Communists will not be there for display purposes alone. The National Liberation Front was always a coalition in that it always had non-Communist individuals and groups surrounding its Marxist core. In times of difficulty, of military setback, these groups tended to fall away, but in times of success the Front would widen out. The party always gave political direction, but it would, to its political advantage, take the desires of other groups into account.

Now, after its rapid military victory, the party is once again reaching out. Its task is, of course, much larger and more complicated than it has ever been before, for it is suddenly faced with millions of city people who have not seen its cadre in years. It must first reassure these people and then attempt to gain their support for the difficult times that lie ahead. The problem is not really an ideological one—there has never really been a competing ideology, and therein lies the failure of all the American-supported regimes. It is rather one of persons: who in the politically atomized society of the South will be seen as legitimate or representative?

When it appears, the new government will, no doubt, schedule an election, such as envisioned in the Paris peace accord, and there will be, eventually, a national assembly that will include representatives of all religious groups, and economic "strata" and recognized political parties. Much more important, however, the new authorities will begin to organize in the traditional manner of the Front, forming labor unions, farmers' assocations, women's groups, student groups and so on. These groups will receive political training and in choosing their own leaders create a new infrastructure of government. The political reunification of North and South Vietnam will undoubtedly wait upon the completion of this task, for it is difficult to imagine that the Vietnamese would combine a highly organized part of the country with a highly disorganized one.

Economic Problems

THE EFFORT at organization will proceed in tandem with an attempt to solve some of the enormous economic problems of South Vietnam. The most pressing of those is simply how to feed and employ the millions of soldiers and city people who for the past 10 years have lived directly or indirectly on American aid.

There will be food shortages over the next few months; in central Vietnam, where shortages have existed for the past year or so, the situation could become critical. Already the new authorities in Danang have instituted a rationing system for rice and urged refugees who have come into the city over the past 10 years to return to their villages — or the places where their villages were.

Undoubtedly many people will go back to the countryside, and gladly. But not everyone can, or will want to, go back and the country cannot return to the *status quo ante*.

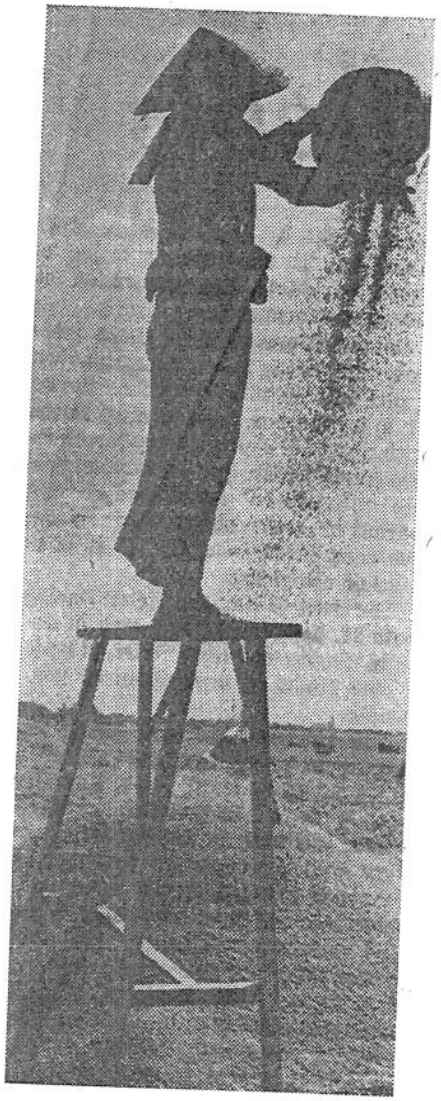
For one thing, the population has grown; for another, much of the now-fallow agricultural land is so cratered, hardened over and filled with unexploded ordnance as to be untillable without major reconstruction work. Last year South Vietnam grew almost enough rice to feed its population, but it did so only with the help of large American aid subsidies for chemical fertilizer, agricultural machinery and gasoline. South Vietnamese agriculture is potentially valuable, but it will require a good deal of capital investment, and the country has at the moment no industry to speak of and no capital—its assets in the United States, reportedly including its gold reserves, have been frozen.

North Vietnam, the Soviet Union and China will undoubtedly contribute to the reconstruction of South Vietnam—two Soviet supply ships have already landed at Danang—but the new government is clearly hoping for aid and investment from other sources. Officials in Danang and Paris have restated their policy of nonalignment—a policy that goes back to the original NLF program of 1960. They have also said that until reunification South Vietnam will conduct its economic and foreign affairs independently of North Vietnam.

Already they have asked for membership in the United Nations and called for humanitarian assistance from any source, including the United States. They have declared willingness to enter into economic relations with capitalist countries and corporations. Specifically, they have said that they would like the Western companies that were doing offshore oil exploration and drilling to continue with their work. As yet there has been no talk of cooperativizing agricultural land, and, according to Liberation Radio, "commercial and industrial enterprises serving national economic life and the normalization of living will be guaranteed their property and assets and may carry on operations."

Whether or not Western countries and Japan respond to this policy and invest in South Vietnam will surely make a good deal of difference to the future domestic and external policies of the southern government. In the first place the harder economic recovery is, the harsher the measures the regime will have to take—and any downward change in living standards will be felt most acutely by those who sided with the United States and the Thieu regime. In the second place the closer the ties the new regime develops with the West and Japan, the greater will be the incentive for it—and for the North—to place itself on the margins of the Soviet and Chinese economic systems and in the context of the Third World and a neutral Southeast Asia.

The new regime will not close itself off from the outside world, but Saigon will no longer be the cosmopolitan city of the French and the Americans. From the perspective of the revolutionaries, recovery from the war consists largely in shucking off American influence from the society.



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Winnowing rice in South Vietnam.

What this influence means to them is not just the inequalities of wealth (capitalism is not really an issue since so few capitalist enterprises actually exist) but a whole series of habits and attitudes: a psychology and a culture. As the revolutionaries see it, the corruption of the old regime, the drug-taking, the mini-skirts and the prostitution were but the outward signs of a profound deracination. As they see it, it was long dependency on Americans that made the Saigonese so negative, so passive, so egotistical.

Radical egalitarians, the revolutionaries are at the same time cultural conservatives who support the values of the country people against those of the city, authoritarianism over libertarianism. And unlike many Communist elites, they are perfectly consistent in their defense of the community against the individual. As their leadership is collective and their poverty collective, so they see "individualism" as a kind of anarchy—an alienation of the individual. Consistently they have closed the newspapers and the nightclubs at the same time. They believe—they really believe—that the society will be positivist and unanimous as soon as American influence is gone. This faith in moral rehabilitation is useful in that it admits of no permanent enemies: all Vietnamese can be taken back into the fold. And the faith may not be entirely misplaced. Certainly the new anti-Americanism of Saigon will do a great deal to bring the society back together again.

Ho Chi Minh's picture now hangs in the streets of Saigon. His is the only picture there, and the only one in the streets of Hanoi. For northern and southern revolutionaries alike, this picture is the symbol not of northern dominance but of a national struggle for independence and reunification. Already North Vietnam has announced that it will build roads between North and South and hotels in Hanoi so that the southerners can come to visit. There will, officials say, be a "complex period" of economic, political and psychological adjustment that may last three years or five years, or more; it is not certain. But in the end this country will be reunified and the dream of Ho Chi Minh fulfilled.

The "Hidden Dramas"

FOR THOSE who have been faithful to that dream it is even now as if the years of the war did not exist—as if they were nothing but frozen time. A French journalist wrote recently from Hanoi:

"Many of my old friends, old southern cadre, regrouped to the North after Geneva [the Geneva Conference of 1954], come to me these days with tears in their eyes saying, 'My village is liberated . . . my region is liberated . . .' And then you discover incredible, hidden dramas. One man I have been friendly with for a long time, and who knows how to laugh, told me that his wife lived in Hue: she had been obliged to remain there as the mistress of an old French planter, and he had had no news of her in 40 years. Many people come and tell me, joyously, 'I am going to see my father again.' It is odd to hear that from a man of 50, and so you ask how long it has been, and they say, 'Thirty years.' . . . It is true that the Vietnamese live less in the context of space than of time. They seem to have put their entire lives between parentheses waiting for this one day, and the day has arrived. You see people of 70—you don't dare call them 'old'—impatiently making plans to visit the places of their childhood. But today in Hanoi everyone is 20 years old."

I saw the same kind of dramas in the villages of the South in the moment of false hope just after the Paris peace accord was signed. There was a woman who had waited 20 years to marry her fiance and a man who after 12 years in prison had returned—a cripple—to his job of political organizing in his village. For many Vietnamese the end of the war is a liberation not just of their country but of their history.