

Vietnam Assessed: Visits to the

By Philip C. Clarke

Despite enormous physical losses, South Vietnam appears to be recovering from its latest ordeal-by-fire potentially in better shape than before. Its armed forces, though bloodied, are leaner and tougher, having passed their first real combat test since Vietnamization was accelerated in 1969. More importantly, there are clear signs of an awakening self-reliance—largely by necessity.

Undoubtedly it will take several years—and many millions more U.S. dollars—to replace the manpower and matériel lost in stemming the North Vietnamese invasion. Many South Vietnamese units were badly mauled and their trained officer corps decimated. Sizable chunks of border territory remain to be retaken and “re-pacified.”

Also, there is still heavy dependence on U.S. air support and supplies; without them, Saigon today would be Hanoi's. The country's economy, always verging on collapse under the relentless pressures of a prolonged war, has been further strained by a new wave of 1.2 million refugees.

Yet, while fully conceding the vital importance of the U.S. role, both American and South Vietnamese strategists agree that air power alone could not have turned back the 100 or more Soviet-built tanks, held off three of North Vietnam's best divisions and withstood one of history's most devastating sieges at Anloc. Nor could air power alone have repulsed other tank-led assaults in the vital Highlands or retaken the Citadel of Quangtri. The classic military axiom remains: it's the foot soldier who must gain and hold the ground.

As a result, the South Vietnamese soldier with his M-16 and tank-killing M-72—inspired by the continued presence of a handful of utterly courageous and dedicated U.S. Army advisers—walks a bit taller in South Vietnam today. The defenders of Anloc, for example, now proudly wear a special shoulder patch labeled simply “Binhliong,” Anloc's province. Every South Vietnamese understands its meaning.

When the Citadel was recaptured, President Thieu declared a two-day period of national thanksgiving. On a drive through the countryside north of Saigon, I saw South Vietnamese flags, many handmade, flying from virtually every building and thatched-roofed hut. Even farm wagons had the red and gold Saigon colors pasted on their side. And on one country road, a tiny South Vietnamese flag fluttered from the yoke of a water buffalo.

Such declarations of fidelity require considerable audacity and confidence in a country alive with enemy guerrillas eager to pounce on Saigon's “collaborators.”

There are other examples. When President Thieu flew into Anloc July 6 after the siege was partially lifted,



Jean-Pierre Laffont/Gamma

rag-tag soldiers and civilians hoisted the astonished President onto their shoulders and carried him about in the rubble in an impromptu victory parade. American advisers on the scene told me they never had seen anything like that emotional display in all their collective years in Vietnam.

All of this by no means denotes a tidal wave of patriotism as we Americans know it; South Vietnam is as yet too young a country and too uncertain a democracy and its internal political and social problems reach too deeply. What it does mean, I believe, is a first-ever rallying of public sentiment around those who are seeking to prevent a Communist takeover.

For many South Vietnamese, it's not so much that they love the Saigon Government as it is that they fear and hate the Communists. In Tet '68, and now again with the '72 Easter offensive, the North Vietnamese and their Vietcong allies proved to be their own worst enemies. The atrocities at Hue four years ago were duplicated this summer in the savage gunning down of hundreds of unarmed refugees as they attempted to flee battle areas—significantly always toward the South and whatever protection the Saigon Government could afford.

There can be little question that the conventional North Vietnamese invasion has failed. In recent days, North

Vietnamese deserters in the Quangtri area were found to have been thrown into battle without weapons. Some had been without food for as many as four days. Captured enemy documents included urgent appeals from company commanders for AK-47's; they had been returned marked “unable provide.”

At a refugee camp for victims of the Anloc assault, I saw more than 25,000 Vietnamese of all ages, many horribly scarred, existing on a sun-scorched patch of scrubland, packed 250 per batch under army tents designed for 40 men. Yet, they still could cook their meager rations, wash their clothes in the nearby stream, wait their turn before the community well and half-dozen latrines, care for the orphaned children, organize their own perimeter defenses—and smile for the occasional visitor.

Practically all want to return to Anloc; 2,000 now live in its ruins.

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South and the North

By George McT. Kahin

ITHACA, N. Y. — When I left Hanoi on Sept. 30, high Government officials with whom I had been talking lacked any hope that the well-publicized talks with Henry Kissinger would be fruitful.

Rumors, then already enjoying wide currency in the United States, that a real breakthrough in the negotiations was imminent were completely at variance with their assessment of the discussions. Although they wanted to keep the door of negotiations open wide by continuing the talks—both public and private—they told me that these remained deadlocked, with Mr. Kissinger unwilling to discuss some of the issues they regard as most important.

These officials said that because a significant elaboration of the settlement proposal they had presented in private meetings had neither been given serious attention nor conveyed to the American public, they issued, on Sept. 11, a public statement incorporating its main points. Aware of the Nixon Administration's arguments against a coalition on the grounds that it would probably be dominated by the Provisional Revolutionary Government (the N.L.F.), they observed that they had as much reason to worry about its domination by Saigon. They had therefore proposed that agreement on representation of the middle component of the tripartite coalition be worked out through direct negotiations between Saigon and the P.R.G. They told me that in subsequent private meetings with Kissinger they had repeatedly but unsuccessfully invited him to work out with them means for insuring that neither Saigon nor North Vietnam could control a tripartite coalition.

In essence, Hanoi and the P.R.G. have been saying: If your major objection to a transitional tripartite coalition is the fear that Communists would control it, let us sit down now and try to work out a solution that will assure you this won't happen and will at the same time assure us that the Saigon component of that government won't dominate it either.

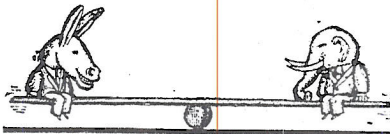
Because Kissinger had, according to them, been unwilling to do this, they had become even more convinced that Mr. Nixon was not genuinely interested in a negotiated end to the war. I received the distinct impression that while the Communists wanted to make clear that they remained ready to talk, they saw the Nixon Administration as looking over their heads and playing primarily to an American audience rather than addressing itself to the real substance of negotiation.

In Hanoi I gained a better understanding of what the Communists have

in mind in their proposed tripartite transitional government that they regard as an essential bridge to any settlement among the Vietnamese. They see it as providing not only the means for achieving and monitoring a cease-fire among the Vietnamese military factions and an aegis under which elections for a constituent assembly and a new government can be prepared and carried out. In addition, they regard the moderating middle component of the tripartite administration as providing one of the best assurances against political reprisals by members of either of the currently warring factions.

This middle component—made up of individuals who are neither pro-Communist nor pro-Saigon—is to emerge as a consequence of direct negotiations between the Saigon administration and the P.R.G.

Certainly as of the end of September the Communists were still arguing for



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Thieu's exclusion because of his vested interest in continuing the war.

They saw maintenance of his present political position as incompatible with the steps toward compromise which establishment of a tripartite government would entail. With Mr. Thieu still in power they could see little possibility of jailed middle-group elements being permitted to play the mediating role which they regard as essential to the viability of a transitional coalition.

With respect to American participation in the war, officials of the Hanoi Government and P.R.G. assured me that, in conformity with their July 1971 proposal, once the U.S. ends all acts of military force and support for Thieu they are still prepared to enter immediately into a bilateral armistice with the U.S. (separate from and preceding a cease-fire among the Vietnamese factions) providing for a release of prisoners concomitant with the withdrawal of residual troops—the two processes to proceed at the same pace, and beginning and ending on the same dates. This means then that there is built into the processes of troop withdrawal and prisoner release a provision for a mutual monitoring whereby both sides can check at any point within an agreed time span on the other side's performance.

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