

NYTimes
Saigon's New Chief Spokesman
Hoang Duc Nha

JAN 11 1973

By FOX BUTTERFIELD

Special to The New York Times

SAIGON, South Vietnam, Jan. 10—When Hoang Duc Nha first proposed to his wife, Tam, her family vehemently opposed the marriage. "He is only a poor engineer working in a Government office, he has no future," friends recall that her parents said at the time.

Man
in the
News

They suggested a wealthy doctor instead. But she thought better of the tall, boyishly good-looking

Mr. Nha and agreed to the match—she was right.

At the early age of 31 Mr. Nha has quietly become the closest confidant of President Nguyen Van Thieu and, in the view of most knowledgeable Vietnamese, the most powerful man in the country after the President.

In a country that values family ties, it is not surprising that Mr. Nha is also President Thieu's cousin and adopted nephew.

A Hand in Everything

Disguised behind the unpretentious titles of press secretary and secretary to the President, Mr. Nha reportedly has a hand in everything from helping write Mr. Thieu's speeches to appointing ambassadors to transferring generals. When Henry A. Kissinger came to Saigon in October to negotiate South Vietnam's agreement to the draft peace accord, Mr. Nha—who speaks fluent English—alone sat in with Mr. Thieu on the talks.

In fact, Mr. Nha appears to combine the roles played in Washington by Mr. Kissinger, Ronald L. Ziegler, the White House press secretary, and Charles G. (Bebe) Rebozo, President Nixon's closest friend.

Today Mr. Nha added another job—President Thieu appointed him head of the new National Commission for Information, which will combine in one office the Ministry of Information, the



United Press International

Said to have a part in every activity.

presidential press office, the national radio and television stations, and part of the army's powerful Political Warfare Department.

As commission general of state for information, with the rank of Cabinet minister, Mr. Nha will be responsible for an ambitious effort to build up the Government's propaganda machinery and counter the Communists in the event of a ceasefire. The Vietnamese name for his new office, translated literally, is Special Commission for Civic Proselytizing.

To many Vietnamese and Americans, Mr. Nha is a strange choice for the job. For a year, since Mr. Thieu's re-election as President in the fall of 1971, Mr. Nha has gradually broken off almost all contact with the large Saigon press corps, refusing to accept phone calls, never holding press conferences, and rebuffing all attempts to interview Mr. Thieu.

One foreign newsman who has tried phoning Mr. Nha regularly for 15 months has been told every time, "I'm sorry, Mr. Nha is not in his office today."

He Puts in Long Days

In part this appears to be because of Mr. Nha's ever-increasing responsibilities beyond his job as press secretary. Aides say he regularly works from 8 in the morning till 10 at night in his small, air-conditioned office on the first floor of the Presidential Palace. And more and more, recently, he has met privately with Mr. Thieu to discuss the peace talks.

But some former friends, diplomats and newsmen also feel that he has become increasingly remote as he has risen in power. He has even shunned associates in the American Embassy, where some officials have taken to calling him "that punk kid."

His bad relations with Americans are ironic, because Mr. Thieu clearly values him as an expert in handling Americans. Mr. Nha graduated with a bachelor of science in electrical engineering from the University of Pittsburgh in 1966, and he affects many Western customs: driving a green Mustang, wearing well-tailored business suits in the latest fabrics, smoking expensive foreign cigarettes.

Mark of Greatness

One of Mr. Nha's few outwardly Vietnamese characteristics is his habit of allowing several long hairs to protrude from a prominent mole on his cheek. In Vietnamese tradition, it is a mark of man rated to become great.

Born into a family of small rice merchants in the central Vietnamese coastal province of Ninh Thuan, Mr. Nha has always been regarded as intelligent, articulate and a very quick learner. Although his family tie to President Thieu has undoubtedly helped lead to the President's trust in him, when he first went to work for Mr. Thieu in 1967, he was only one of several family members in the office, and friends say it was his ability that enabled him to outstrip the others.

Mr. Nha's wife is also American-educated, a graduate of the Oakland School of Art. Unlike the wives of many prominent Vietnamese, she takes little interest in business and spends her time at home painting bright abstract canvasses and taking care of their two children, a 4-year-old boy and a 2-year-old girl.

His Friends Do Well

Several of Mr. Nha's friends and family members have risen to power with him. His brother, Hoang Duc Ninh, a controversial figure who lost his job last year as a province chief after having been charged with rigging elections, managed to be promoted to brigadier general last month. He now commands the strategic, and reportedly lucrative 44th Special Tactical Zone, which controls the border between Cambodia and South Vietnam in the Mekong Delta.

The Vietnamese Ambassador to Washington, Tran Kim Phuong, was a close personal friend of Mr. Nha before receiving his appointment last summer.

Although busy with high-level policy making, Mr. Nha takes a keen interest in almost everything President Thieu does. On several of the President's recent trips to the war fronts or military cemeteries, Mr. Nha has supervised security arrangements over his own walkie-talkie and snapped pictures for the press—since newsmen were not invited.