

# While Thousands Weep

By Anthony Lewis

PARIS—In the Vietnamese way, his voice remained soft and conversational despite the emotion of his thoughts.

"This time something has to change," he said. "There has been too much suffering—now there must be reconciliation. The people in Saigon see it, the Provisional Revolutionary Government sees it, Hanoi sees it. They have all suffered. If the Vietnamese do not reconcile themselves, the Americans can do nothing for real peace no matter how long they stay."

It was one of Paris' many Vietnamese political exiles speaking: Ho Thong Minh, minister of defense in Ngo Diem's first Government way back in 1954-55. He resigned because, as he puts it, "I found that Diem was a backward, reactionary man, and I saw no hope for Vietnam." He slipped out of Saigon, past Diem's security men, and came to Paris.

In his person Ho Thong reflects the tragedy of his country and of America's involvement in it. His aim is the one that Vietnamese political figures of all views avow: an independent Vietnam, free of foreign control. But in a lifetime of working with this force and that he has not found the means to the end.

He was 19 years old, in 1939, when he first joined the struggle against the colonial French. After World War II, when the French returned, he was on the general staff of the resistance movement in the far south of Vietnam. But he found "the Communists wanted to take all power for themselves," so he left the movement for civilian life as an engineer.

Diem made him deputy defense minister in 1954. After a month, he says, "The Americans urged Diem to put me in full charge, and he did." So there is special irony in what has happened to his view of the United States.

"In 1954," Minh says, "I had great hope in America—a great anticolonial country. But as time went on, I saw that that was not so.

"In Washington in 1963 one of your generals told me that all the Americans would be out of Vietnam by the end of 1965. Then in 1965, the day the first American bombs fell on North Vietnam, I heard that the Pentagon said they would be on their knees in six or eight weeks. But I knew that would not be so, then or ever.

"After that my confidence in the Americans went. I told my friends that we would have to do it by ourselves."

Ho Thong Minh has made one visit to Saigon since 1955, in 1968. The Thieu Government allowed him in because his father had died. But when

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## AT HOME ABROAD

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### *The way to peace is reconciliation of the Vietnamese.*

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the Tet offensive started, he was put in jail and kept there until he went on a hunger strike two months later.

Today, like so many of the exiles in Paris, he is in the middle. He is one of the neutralists who might be serving now with Saigon and P.R.G. members in the Council of National Reconciliation if President Nixon had carried out the terms negotiated by Henry Kissinger last October.

"Certainly the people of South Vietnam do not want Communism," he says, "but neither do they want an army dictatorship. Our way of life has drifted from our origins. We must be more ourselves. We cannot live an American way of life.

"It all tells in our economic and military and social strength. The occidental eye looks at us now and says that Saigon can stand up against the North. But it is a strength from outside—artificial."

He believes that only a "third-force Government" led by neutrals can save South Vietnam from more suffering. He says, "The only way to have peace in Southeast Asia is reconciliation among the Vietnamese—first in the South, then between South and North."

It is always so sad to meet the neutralist Vietnamese politicians in Paris. They are naturally appealing to Americans, who mostly dislike the extremist politics of ideology and go for the middle of the road. But there is no middle of the road in Vietnam now.

The American Government decided long ago to oppose any move toward neutralism or political accommodation in South Vietnam, staking all on the survival of Nguyen Van Thieu and his autocracy. It did so not for the sake of the Vietnamese but out of concern for its own face. That is why the destruction has had to go on for so long, North and South.

Now the signs are that a cease-fire may really be at hand. The decision is up to Richard Nixon, and this time the approach of Inauguration Day may concentrate his mind. But whatever peace there may be is not likely to create Ho Thong Minh's vision of a reconciled Vietnam, free of suffering at last.

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