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Vietnam: No End In Sight

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By Tom Wicker

Cease-fire or no cease-fire, fighting is continuing in South Vietnam, with both sides violating the rules almost at will, and with the North Vietnamese by all accounts sending in men and equipment in large quantities. American officials, who for weeks maintained a determined optimism, are now conceding that at least low-level combat is likely to continue.

One reason for this may well be that, contrary to the opinion of many Americans, both dove and hawk, the withdrawal of American combat forces from South Vietnam does not mean that the country will fall almost immediately into Communist hands. And since that is almost certain to be well understood by the Vietcong and in Hanoi, it is not too surprising that they should want to keep up and even improve their military strength in relation to President Thieu's huge and well-armed army.

The likelihood is that the South Vietnamese Communists know they are no more than a well-organized "solid minority," in the view of Samuel Popkin, the Harvard scholar who has been making a continuing study of Vietnamese village life and politics. They would also know, therefore, that they are not now able to win national power in straightforward political competition with the entrenched Thieu regime.

One possibility, of course, is a renewed military offensive, after all the American forces have departed. But the Soviet and Chinese suppliers of military goods would surely be op-

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posed to such a move; it might well bring at least American air power back into action in both North and South Vietnam, and there is no certainty that the offensive would succeed. Such an open and massive violation of the peace agreements, moreover, could cost the North Vietnamese the good opinion so much of the world accords them.

It seems more likely, therefore, that the Communist military build-up is designed to make certain that there will be no withering away of North Vietnamese forces remaining in the South, as had been predicted by Henry Kissinger, and that the military balance in the South does not go decisively in favor of the Saigon Government while a protracted political struggle is going on in the cities and countryside.

What Samuel Popkin expects is that within about two years—if there is no general military offensive or renewed warfare—the Communists will have gained solid control of the governments of perhaps five or more provinces, as well as local control in many other areas, and will have won "a piece of the action" in the national legislature. That would set the stage for a Presidential election in 1975, if anything like the present constitutional processes are maintained.

In this analysis, there are good reasons why the Thieu regime is by no means the pushover that many in the United States have thought it to be—the first of which is that, his policies and purposes aside, Nguyen Van Thieu has proved himself to be a tough and skilled leader with an advanced ability to survive all kinds of crises and pressures.

He has manipulated and won two national elections, withstood the great North Vietnamese offensives of 1968 and 1972, and survived the American peace moves of the same years; he has outmaneuvered the legislature, silenced the press and jailed or stymied most of his opponents, real and imaginary. Long after most critics thought he would be in Switzerland with a numbered bank account, he still looks in reasonably good political shape in South Vietnam.

He has played politics with minority and interest groups—Hoa Hao, Cao Dai, Buddhists—that Ngo Dinh Diem tried to suppress, with the result that while none professes him as leader none puts forward a viable alternative either, or has coalesced with others into an effective opposition. And while "neutralist" leaders—getting out of jail or coming home from Paris—might weaken him by building a non-Communist opposition, that will not be easily or quickly done when he so strongly controls the powers of government.

Unlike the Provisional Revolutionary Government in the areas it controls, Mr. Thieu does not have to collect much in taxes from the peasantry; he gets most of what he needs through American aid—no small political advantage. On the other hand, by standing up to Lyndon Johnson in 1968 and Richard Nixon in 1972, he has not allowed his Communist opponents to get a monopoly on anti-Americanism, as they did against Diem a decade ago.

Besides all this, Mr. Popkin is convinced that the South Vietnamese Communists are weaker and the Saigon Government is stronger in the villages, as compared to their relative strengths when the Tet offensive began in 1968. Then, he believes, the Communists suffered not just great physical losses; they also lost the invaluable aura of "inevitable victors" they once had conveyed to the peasants.