

In The Nation: Saigon in the New Year

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WASHINGTON, Dec. 31—As a sad year of death and destruction comes to a close in Vietnam, no one can say with certainty that 1967 can bring that violated land and its tragic people nearer to peace. Still, this New Year's Eve, there are a few small suggestions of dawn somewhere beyond the dark night of war.

For instance, the most recent study of Vietcong deserters and defectors, an account of which was published in this newspaper, suggested that there was "a gradual erosion of backing for the Vietcong as their movement becomes less of a revolution whose future is filled with promises and more of a government that is judged by its acts."

This "government," the study showed, was encountering "the same indifference among the war-weary South Vietnamese people as the Saigon regime does", and the striking fact was disclosed that Vietcong and Saigon troops most often desert for the same reason—a feeling that a profitless war has gone on for too long.

The New Constitution

It also has been reported that the constituent assembly now drafting a Constitution for South Vietnam has voted to provide for the election of all local officials in the civilian regime it is seeking to establish, as well as a bicameral parliamentary body. If ultimately in effect, the election provision not

only would encourage broadly popular government throughout South Vietnam but would break the present, often reactionary, grip of the military on the administration of local affairs. The legislative branch would be designed as a popular check on executive power.

Moreover, despite Hanoi's swift denunciation of President Johnson's truce overture to U Thant, some officials and others here profess to see faint signs of a greater receptivity in North Vietnam to the kind of peripheral contacts that might lead to something useful. And it remains evident that the Hanoi Government is not monolithic in its determination to fight it out on the present line.

Only a fool could base real optimism on such bits and scraps, and others like them. Still, they emphasize one overriding task which, if achieved, might retrieve what is admittedly a grim situation. That task is the development in Saigon of a progressive and stable government of representative civilians and the reformist elements of the army.

This is necessary on two counts. While the war lasts, and even after it ends, only this kind of a regime can hope to succeed in the kind of pacification and reform program that can weld a war-torn and weary population into a united nation.

Perhaps more important, if it is true that the people of South Vietnam, whether dominated by Saigon or the Vietcong, want

peace more than anything else, and if it is true that there are elements in Hanoi dubious about the prospects of winning the war, only a progressive civilian regime in Saigon is likely to be able to develop these sentiments into a credible bid for peace negotiations.

Common Interests

That is because, in the long run, more community of interest exists between the peoples of North and South than between any other parties to this sad struggle—not least, the desire for peace after decades of war. Old economic, historical, political and personal ties could be exploited. And many observers believe that another element that might pull Hanoi and a non-military government in Saigon together is a mutual centuries-old desire to avoid Chinese domination.

The United States is handicapped as a peacemaker because it is the foreign power that drops bombs and napalm; China has made it plain, in Dean Rusk's phrase, that she wants to fight to the last Vietnamese; the Soviet Union has to support another member of the "Socialist camp;" France is the former colonialist exploiter; the United Nations reflects these and other handicaps; and the other Asian nations lack the authority to produce a settlement.

Thus, the last best hope of a negotiated peace well may lie between North and South Vietnam. But that prospect cannot

be explored until there is a government in Saigon strong enough to make the attempt, representative enough to speak for the people of the South, and progressive enough for Hanoi and the Vietcong to countenance.

Such a North-South settlement surely would give some political legitimacy to elements of the Vietcong and might lead in the long run to a Communist regime in Vietnam. But if the deepest American interest is to create a situation in Southeast Asia that would be a barrier to Chinese expansionism and domination of the continent, how could it be better advanced than to create a strong Vietnam (perhaps a North-South federation) that did not owe its independence or its livelihood to its gigantic neighbor? Such a Vietnam, historically anti-Chinese, might become the centerpiece of an association of independent, neutral Southeast Asian nations and the cornerstone of a co-existence rather than a containment policy.

The Job in Saigon

Washington's primary task in 1967, therefore, may lie right in Saigon, where the coming months could be crucial to prospects for a progressive, representative, non-military government. The United States may not be able to impose such a government on South Vietnam; but it ought to see to it that no one in the present military regime prevents its development.