

AFTER THE WAR

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VIOLENT POLITICAL STRUGGLE CONTINUES IN SOUTH VIETNAM. JUNIOR SOUTH VIETNAMESE OFFICERS NEGOTIATING THEIR OWN DEALS WITH THE VIET CONG. THIEU MAKES A DRAMATIC APPEAL TO HIS GENERALS. HANOI'S GENERALS CHALLENGE PARTY'S ORDERS. NORTH VIETNAM GROWING WARY OF SOVIET AND CHINESE INTENTIONS. HANOI MOVES CLOSER TO THE UNITED STATES.

Any of these could be future headlines from Indochina. No one knows what will happen yet -- not Le Duc Tho, not Madame Binh, not President Thieu. Whatever one writes now about the future of Indochina is fiction, as are the following accounts which might be filed from Saigon and Hanoi two years from now.

Saigon, 1975 -- Few now can remember the date the ceasefire was signed. The end of the war has proved as unmemorable as its beginning. As expected, the ceasefire did not end the fighting in South Vietnam. Military activity continued in the form of a land rush as both armies tried to grab each other's territory. The land rush was followed by a less obvious but no less violent political struggle that for local government officials and Viet Cong cadres was bloodier than the war. Both sides had prepared for it. For months, Viet Cong directives had emphasized that there were to be no accommodations, no sharing of power at hamlet or village level. "Local tyrants," meaning government officials, were to be eliminated and uprisings were to be fomented.

The South Vietnamese government had dispatched thousands of junior army officers to act as political organizers. They were to help create "people's anti-Communist struggle committees" which were supposed to squash any local uprisings and root out Viet Cong cadres. Fearing that less resolute elements at lower echelons might rather switch than fight, President Thieu also organized a political party

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whose members were to be loyal to him personally. A covert wing of the party was created in the army so that officers loyal to Thieu could immediately report if their comrades began to conduct any private negotiations.

After several months of struggle, the Viet Cong seemed to be winning. The red and blue flags of the National Liberation Front were hoisted in village after village. At first South Vietnamese units shot them down, but after a while they did not bother. Flags no longer mattered. It soon became apparent that the lieutenants and captains whom Thieu had chosen to rely on were making deals with them instead.

Many of these young men had been drafted or joined the army since 1968. They were plucked out of government jobs, scholarships and teaching posts, and they resented it. They had no desire to pursue a military career. They were anxious to end the fighting and return to their civilian jobs. As junior officers, they were not so closely tied to the Thieu government that they would not be able to survive under a government in which the Viet Cong participated or even dominated. Their discussions with the Viet Cong had, in fact, convinced them that the Provisional Revolutionary Government, although popular and strong in some areas, could not hope to administer the entire country without their cooperation and participation.

South Vietnamese field commanders and province chiefs had less room to maneuver. They could not from their positions negotiate any deals with the other side, but they tried hard to avoid military clashes that might preclude making deals later. Their solution was to stall, which they did by secretly doublechecking Thieu's orders with the Tripartite Council in Saigon. They, in effect, recognized the Council as an alternate government, for them one that was safer to obey.

The generals near the top were in a quandary. Considerable pressure was being put on them by the colonels to remove Thieu and negotiate an accommodation deal with the Viet Cong that would save them all. The generals did not want to go down with Thieu either, but they foresaw little future for themselves in a government dominated

by Communists or neutralists. While the generals debated what to do the situation in Saigon deteriorated. The roads into Saigon were blockaded by pockets of Viet Cong control. Little food was coming into the city. Prices skyrocketed. Paper currency was worthless. Viet Cong agents moved around the city skillfully exploiting the popular unrest. There were daily demonstrations against the government, and the disabled veterans grew more violent. Large red banners appeared throughout Saigon demanding Thieu's resignation and supporting the Tripartite Council. Ordinarily Thieu would have smashed this kind of opposition instantly, but this time he did not. He was aware of the mood of the young officers, and he was not at all certain about which way they might go in a confrontation with hungry people and disabled veterans.

The first direct move against Thieu came unexpectedly from the right when a small group of hawkish generals launched an abortive coup. They had planned to overthrow Thieu and eliminate the Tripartite Council, knowing that this surely would provoke the North Vietnamese into resuming full-scale hostilities. They believed that they could then rally the army, and hoped the United States, under such circumstances, would not abandon them. It was a total flop. The colonel they had bribed, a commander of one of the battalions guarding the National Palace, failed to get his units into position in time. Thieu moved fast. He may have temporarily lost his nerve in the demonstrations, but this kind of nonsense he was capable of handling. Within a few hours, the leaders were arrested and the bewildered troops were sent back to their barracks.

The attempted coup was a clue that the government was fraying at the edges, and would come apart unless some changes were made. In August 1973, amidst a new outburst of rioting in Saigon, the generals met to decide upon a course of action. President Thieu had feared something like this since the day the ceasefire was signed. He never worried about the Communists so much as he worried about what his commanders might do if they figured he had lost American support. His mandate to rule came, not from heaven, but from Washington. The army remained loyal to him because the Americans

supported him, and the army depended on American support. In agreeing to the ceasefire, Washington had made a deal with the enemy without his approval. So might the South Vietnamese officer corps.

Thieu appeared personally at the generals' meeting and made a dramatic appeal for their support. He had done this successfully once before in 1967 when the army was divided on the issue of whether to support him or Ky for the Presidency. It was an emotional confrontation. The generals argued that they did not want to be disloyal to him, but he had to go. Thieu argued that his overthrow would only permit the United States to discontinue its support -- the mandate of Washington thing. But the generals countered, saying that continued American military assistance could not prevent the erosion of government authority in the countryside. Thieu had no choice but to leave, and the generals opened direct negotiations with the Tripartite Council for a settlement.

Soon after, a second change in the government was announced. The Government of Vietnam represented by the generals merged with the Tripartite Council of National Reconciliation. Former members of President Thieu's cabinet were named to fill posts in a new cabinet along with leaders of the National Liberation Front. It was not clear who really controlled the government, or if it controlled anything. There was a clear-cut danger that central authority would collapse altogether. The generals in the field were acting independently. Nobody was sure which side the junior officers were on. The Viet Cong seemed equally confused. South Vietnam was coming apart.

The new government managed to end the riots in Saigon, but was unable to restore its authority over the countryside. It was crucial that it gain the allegiance of the junior officers and Viet Cong cadres who virtually controlled the countryside. Since the government was not strong enough to impose its authority over them, it had no choice but to validate whatever local arrangements they had made. It announced that hamlet elections would be held nationwide, thus recognizing and legalizing the accommodations.

The local election gambit, however, did not end the fighting. Many obstacles still remain. "Mini-warlordism" -- local autonomy by junior officers -- remains high. "Red zones," traditional strongholds of hard-core Viet Cong who have vowed to continue the struggle, can be found in many remote parts of the country. There are also a few right-wing holdouts. One tough old general who still controls the remnants of two divisions has sworn to keep fighting the Communists. Guerrilla warfare or banditry, no one is sure which, is said to be widespread, but no one knows how widespread. The government faces a long-term pacification problem.

Hanoi, 1975 -- Would North Vietnam's government survive peace? For decades, North Vietnam had been a garrison state, born of war, molded by war, determined to keep fighting. War justified the discipline, the regimentation, and the rigid control which the government exercised over every aspect of human activity. War demanded unity among the nation's leaders. War suppressed political debate, and prevented open divisions within the government. Peace suddenly unleashed forces that war had contained.

The most serious problem faced by the government was the growing belligerence of the army, the only organization in North Vietnam capable of challenging the Communist Party itself. Serious differences arose between army Hawks and pragmatists in the politburo over North Vietnam's military role in the South during the ceasefire. Party leaders were determined to gradually reduce the military investment in the South. As good Marxists, they believed that, with the Americans out, historical forces would prevail: the reactionaries in Saigon would inevitably fall.

Meanwhile, there were far more serious problems to deal with at home. North Vietnam's cities lay in ruins, their inhabitants scattered throughout the countryside. The country's industries and transportation facilities had been destroyed. The war had also left behind the usual human wreckage -- a large population of widows, orphans, and thousands of disabled veterans. Reconstruction was the obvious priority task.

The army, on the other hand, viewed the ceasefire in South Vietnam as a merely temporary postponement giving it time to prepare a new offensive. Army chiefs chose to ignore the change in national priorities, continued infiltration at a high rate, and looked for excuses to renew the fighting. This insubordination put the government in a spot. If it followed the army's lead, it might find itself engaged in a costly military contest that would spoil its reconstruction plans. If, on the other hand, the government appeared too soft and ordered the army back, it risked an open confrontation with the generals.

Ironically, the news of Thieu's overthrow saved civilian rule in Hanoi. Had Thieu grown stronger, had he begun to emerge as another Diem, the North Vietnamese army would have demanded action. His fall proved the politburo to be right. South Vietnam would one day deliver itself into North Vietnamese hands without another battle. Waiting for South Vietnam to fall like rotten fruit was hardly the preferred victory scenario of North Vietnam's generals. They had hoped for something more like another Dien Bien Phu followed by a triumphant march into Saigon, but the prospect of eventual victory in the South ended the crisis over strategy. Military and Party leaders still debated other issues on the pages of Party journals.

The generals naturally wanted to maintain a large modern army. They wanted new equipment to replace that lost in the war. But for political as well as economic reasons, Party leaders were determined to cut defense expenditures and reduce the power of the military. The generals wanted more attention devoted to the development of heavy industry in North Vietnam in order to provide the industrial base required by a modern military establishment. Party leaders instead gave first priority to increasing agricultural production. China, which during the war had been compelled to buy grain overseas and ship food to North Vietnam at the same time, made it clear to Hanoi that it should expect no such help in peacetime. The North Vietnamese would either feed themselves or go hungry. None of these differences were serious enough to provoke an open break. The Party clearly held the upper hand. It alone called the shots. The army would challenge its rule no more.

Just to make sure, Party leaders deliberately diverted resources away from the army and even assigned some of its crack fighting units to farming in remote parts of the country. There were no purges to punish army leaders, although a few generals found themselves commanding agricultural communes. Giap remained minister of defense and devoted his attention to the campaigns in Laos and Cambodia, a field of endeavor which the Party deliberately left open to army Hawks.

Once the bombs stopped falling there was a natural tendency among the people of North Vietnam to let up. They were weary of war and tired of sacrifices. The long-awaited peace was a time to fulfill less heroic ambitions than defeating American aggressors. It was time to take it easy and to celebrate. People began to work a little less. There seemed less urgency to the Party's appeals without a war. They spent more time at tea breaks and gossiping at street corner noodle wagons. They ate pigs at New Year's banquets and at wedding feasts long postponed by the war. Women workers who during the war had replaced men on the construction sites and assembly lines went home. The number of pregnancies went up.

In a society of norms and statistics, the letup was noted and measured. Quotas were marked unfulfilled. The sudden decline in the hog population endangered manure production which in turn could lower agricultural output. A postwar baby boom would upset long range development plans.

Dismayed by the breakdown in discipline and forecasts of lagging production, the government launched a major campaign to restore its grip on the population. North Vietnam's highly disciplined, self-sacrificing work force was its primary asset. Party leaders met in plenary session and discussed the problem. To instill a wartime spirit in the tasks of peacetime reconstruction, they needed an enemy to replace American bombers. "North Vietnam was threatened from within," the Party announced, "by capitalist heresies and economic saboteurs" who if not stopped would accomplish what American bombs had not. The warning signalled a widespread crackdown on slackers. Reconstruction was declared the new battle front.

Reconstruction meant not only rebuilding the steel mills. It also meant ideological reconstruction. During the war, while attention had been focused on meeting the needs of the front, factories began offering workers bonuses for higher production. Gypsy labor forces sprang up. Peasants found ways to evade the rigid controls of collective agriculture. Wartime shortages spawned petty corruption. These were the "capitalist heresies." "Economic saboteurs" were any workers who henceforth failed to overfulfill their quotas. Once again, North Vietnam's peasants and workers buckled down to work. Whipped by the harangues of Party cadres, they bent the production curves up again. The garrison state became a factory state.

Hanoi's relations with the Soviet Union reflected its reordering of priorities. Not wanting a large modern army, the North Vietnamese found themselves less dependent on Soviet military aid. Party leaders remained wary of the Soviet Union. They held the Russians indirectly responsible for the growth of the North Vietnamese army and its disobedience to the Party.

The move away from the Soviet Union was not matched by a move toward the Chinese. In peace, the centuries-old animosities between the Vietnamese and the Chinese again emerged. The issue dividing them was competition in Laos and Cambodia. North Vietnam was destined to be the dominant power in Indochina, possibly mainland Southeast Asia, and not as China's little brother. North Vietnamese forces continued to occupy large portions of Laos and Cambodia and exerted constant pressure on their governments.

At the same time, the Chinese started saying that the Laotian and Cambodian peoples could depend on China for support against Asian imperialists. Which Asian imperialists? Chinese protectorates in Indochina which Hanoi regarded as its own sphere of influence did not delight the North Vietnamese.

The Chinese also exploited North Vietnam's decision not to pursue an aggressive military strategy in South Vietnam. Delegations from the few remaining Viet Cong holdouts in South Vietnam were given huge receptions in Peking. China told the southern fighters that China would never abandon them, hinting that North Vietnam had. To

those in Hanoi who had fought and who had been bombed while Chou En-lai dined with Nixon, the insinuation was outrageous.

North Vietnam's relations with the United States gradually improved after the ceasefire. Washington was pleased that the North Vietnamese had abided by the terms of the accord. Never ones to bear grudges, the Americans seemed anxious to make up for the damage they had caused. According to the agreement, the United States provided economic assistance to North Vietnam. At first the aid consisted of small cash grants, but later this was expanded into direct assistance on reconstruction projects.

American officials found it challenging, but at the same time, satisfying working with the North Vietnamese. Grudging respect for tough adversaries gradually turned into admiration. The North Vietnamese had many characteristics that Americans admired. They could organize. They were orderly, industrious, and, like ourselves, interested in rapid progress. They were moralistic and seemingly incorruptible. American officials could not help but make comparisons between the North Vietnamese and the South Vietnamese whose shortcomings were held responsible for frustrating earlier American efforts in Indochina.

It became apparent that North Vietnam would quickly recover from the war, and within a decade probably become a miniature Japan. Cooperation on construction projects increased. American and North Vietnamese technicians are now studying the commercial potential of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. And recently a high level U.S. official remarked that an independent Democratic Republic of Vietnam (the adjectives, although reversed, still sounded vaguely familiar) is important to American security.

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