Behind the Facade

THE TRAGEDY OF SAIGON

by Frances Fitzgerald

This report on the life and half-life of the cockpit city of South Vietnam marks Miss Fitzgerald’s farewell to Saigon. For the last ten months she has lived there, writing articles about the war and its side effects which have appeared in the New York Times Sunday Magazine and New York’s Village Voice. She is twenty-six and a graduate of Radcliffe College. Before going to Vietnam, she wrote for the New York Herald Tribune.

Before entering Saigon, the military traffic from Tan Son Nhat airfield slows in a choking blanket of its own exhaust. Where it crawls along to the narrow bridge in a frenzy of bicycles, pedicabs, and tri-Lambrettas, two piles of garbage mark the entrance to a new quarter of the city. Every evening a girl on spindle heels picks her way over the barrier of rotting fruit and onto the sidewalk. Triumphant, she smiles at the boys who lounge at the soft-drink stand, and with a toss of her long earrings, climbs into a waiting Buick.

Behind her the alleyway carpeted with mud winds back past the facade of new houses into a maze of thatched huts and tin-roofed shacks called Bui Phat. One of the oldest of the refugee quarters, Bui Phat lies just across the river from the generous villas and tree-lined streets of French Saigon. On its tangle of footpaths, white-shirted boys push their Vespas past laborers in black pajamas and women carrying water on coolie poles. After twelve years and a flood of new refugees, Bui Phat is less an urban quarter than a compost of villages where peasants live with their city children. The children run thick underfoot. The police, it is said, rarely enter the quarter for fear of a gang of teen-age boys whose leader, a young army deserter, reigns over Bui Phat.

Though most of Bui Phat lives beyond the law, the electricity lines, and the water system, it is changing, growing rich. Here and there amid the chaos of shacks and alleyways, new concrete buildings rear up in a splendor of pastel-faced walls, neon lights, and plastic garden furniture. In one of them there is an American who suns himself half naked on a porch under a clothesline draped with military uniforms. He does not know, and probably never will, that the house just down the alleyway is owned and inhabited by an agent of the Viet Cong.

Except for Bui Phat and its likenesses, Vietnam shows few signs of its twenty-one-year-old war. Weeds grow quickly in the charred earth of a village, and the jungle sweeps back over the cleared land; where a 500-pound bomb has exploded, a hole several feet wide fills slowly with paddy silt; people no longer build the grand stone tombs that their ancestors lie in. But Bui Phat is the new face of Vietnam. From Danang in the north to Rach-gia, the slow port at the base of the Delta, the new slums, these crushed villages, spread over all the cities and garrisoned towns. Plastered against sandbag forts, piled up under the guns of provincial capitals, huddled behind the straight streets of Saigon, Nhatrang, Quinhon, they are everywhere — everywhere that the refugees can find a piece of land sheltered from the war.

In the past year of the American buildup half a million people have left their villages to be counted as refugees — officially. How many more people have left their homes, no one knows, but for a
single year the estimate is a million. By any estimate (and none is more than an educated guess), the last two years of war have changed the demography of Vietnam. People wash across the country as if the very land had been tilted to drain, primarily into the cities and towns, the real "strategic hamlets" of the war. Sometimes traveling but a thumbspan on the map, these refugees lose their lands, their families, their ancestral homes, and the structure of their lives. Today, more than a quarter of the whole population and over half of the people under government control live in the six big coastal cities, or rather, in the urban complexes, for there is only one "city" in South Vietnam.

Saigon is the city. Once a medium-sized commercial town and the capital of Cochinchina, it has over the last two decades grown into one of the major capitals of the Far East, the center of a country which had no center and the headquarters of several armies. The two million people who live within its twenty-one square miles and the million inhabitants of urban Giadin Province make Saigon ten times more populous than Danang, its largest rival. Since the beginning of World War II, its population has quadrupled within the old city limits, filling in the space between the two formerly independent nuclei of Saigon and Cholon, spreading across the rivers, then imploding back into itself. Closed in on three sides by the marshes and by the war, confined on the fourth by its own army, Saigon now outrivals Tokyo for the greatest density of population in the world. Yet nearly all of its inhabitants live in one- and two-story houses, by habit because Saigon rests on a low mudbank, half-flooded during the monsoon season, in a lacework of rivers and canals.

The public services installed by the French before the war have all but disintegrated under the pressure of the new population, amidst which the 30,000 Americans count for more than their numerical weight. Having lost much of the Indochinese trade and gained but a handful of light industries, Saigon could not under normal conditions support a third of its present population. Without the American troops and their construction projects, unemployment, serious when the French left in 1954, would rise to unimaginable dimensions.

After twenty-one years of war and political crisis, Saigon resembles a single lifeboat thrown into the sea for all the passengers of a sinking ocean liner. It lives on a gamble, a small percentage of probability. In a year the prices of all basic commodities have risen 100 to 200 percent — with the exception of the price of rice, which, because of the U.S. import program, has risen only 60 percent. While in some sectors, wages have soared almost in parallel, the continual adjustments, exaggerated by the blockages of the port as well as the Viet Cong roadblocks, create continual social frictions. In Saigon a man has one out of ten chances to contract tuberculosis; his children, if they reach the age of four (two out of three actually do), have a somewhat better chance to join a gang of juvenile delinquents than to go to a public secondary school.

Though no accurate estimates of their numbers exist, Viet Cong political and paramilitary networks cross the city, their agents spreading propaganda, collecting supplies and intelligence. Not surprisingly, the most effective and resistant of the political cells lodge in the miserable quarters. In downtown Saigon Americans are advised for their own safety to avoid a patch of execrable slums between the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and a U.S. Army complex.

Although the Viet Cong can no longer hope to take Saigon militarily, the conditions of life in Saigon — and to a lesser extent in other cities — present them with a number of political possibilities. In the three years since the fall of the Diem regime, labor strikes, urban demonstrations, and military shuffles in Saigon have made and unmade the successive governments. In addition to the successful coups, numerous coups manqués, demicoups, and semipopular uprisings, threats and rumors have so preoccupied military commanders in the field that the government war effort has been seriously retarded. While the demonstrations have not specifically protested against urban conditions, all of them have fueled themselves on the discontent of the dispossessed city people. During the political crisis last spring, the streets of Saigon were filled each night with crowds waiting for the slightest pretext to attack anything that lay in their path; riots were the evening's pastime — since there was little other entertainment in the city.

Having once stirred up the mobs in Danang and Saigon, the Buddhists lost control, and politics waited on gangs of teen-agers. For weeks the government hesitated to call out the riot police, afraid not so much of the demonstrators as the void of popular support. In the period of confusion, the Viet Cong drew from the reservoirs of violence, but never fully exploited them. The fact that they
did not, and that they have never actively cam-
paigned for organized urban support, owes, per-
haps, less to the bias of Maoist doctrine than to
their own emotional ties with the Vietnamese vil-
lage. But they may learn better. Faced with a
military stalemate, as one analyst points out, they
can only hope for a major breakthrough by ex-
ploring urban unrest. Already in Cholon, Chi-
inese Communist agents are rumored to be filling
the gap of leadership that opened after the fall of
the Diem regime. If the Ky government cannot
win a solid base of support in its cities, its hold on
the nation will remain as tenuous as it seemed at
the height of the crisis.

Despite Saigon’s importance to the national
government and despite the whirlwind of money
passing through it, the city collects very little to
spend on its residents. In a war of staggering fig-
ures, the city budget at a total of $8.7 million (771
million piasters) roughly equals that of Lynchburg,
Virginia, or Allentown, Pennsylvania. When two
thirds of it is deducted for the police and for of-
icial salaries, the remainder for all other city
programs comes to slightly more than one dollar
per person per year.

Although Saigon receives some additional money
from the ministries of Youth, Social Welfare, and
other departments, the amount, apart from the
officials’ salaries, is so small and so enmeshed in
the national budget that it would yield itself up
only to a determined systems analyst with an IBM
machine. Unlike every other region of the coun-
try, Saigon gets nothing from the special wartime
funds distributed by the Revolutionary Develop-
ment Ministry — of which even Anxuyen, a prov-
ine only 4 percent controlled by the government,
receives over a million dollars for its agriculturally
rich population. Because of their relative freedom
from red tape, these funds are more important
than their size would indicate; they are virtually
the only resources available for new programs, for
building rather than maintenance. As for the
direct USAID contributions to Saigon, their total,
unknown for last year, unreleased for this, does not
exceed by much the sum for the water and
electricity development projects.

But it is not just a question of money. There is
no effective administration. Thick as a morning
smog, the bureaucracy hangs over Saigon, wisping,
whorling, drifting directionless, going nowhere.
Theoretically responsible for the “autonomous
city” (autonomous, that is, from the provincial
administration), the mayor of Saigon cannot so
much as replace a spigot on a city water line on his
own authority. Below him a vast network of offi-
cials reaches down into the district, subdistrict,
ward, and family groupings of the city. Created
by the Diem regime as a political control system,
certains of barbed wire; on them factions set up their checkpoints to stop unfriendly appointments and unprofitable programs. For the year that the ministries of Public Works and Transport administered the Saigon bus system, 1100 to 1600 employees ran a total of seventy buses, thirty of which were almost permanently out of commission. The exact number of employees remains a matter of doubt, for such facts are, like the national budget, classified or unofficially interred.

The life of a civil servant is terribly hard. In a city that is growing as expensive as any Western city, a middle-level bureaucrat with a college degree and an army discharge makes $70 to $100 a month; a minister earns less than a prostitute. “Even if a man is honest,” said one high official, sadly, “he still has to provide a house for his family and an education for his children.” In effect, if a civil servant cannot or will not make a living from graft, he must have a second occupation. Along about midnight one functionary can be seen on his Vespa on Tu Do, the street of bars, picking up American soldiers to taxi them back to their barracks.

While American bureaucrats do not have the same money problems (on the contrary), they have practically insured themselves against being any more efficient than the Vietnamese. By adopting the advisory system, USAID functionaries have accepted their “counterparts” lock, stock, red tape, family connections, and box on the organizational chart. Advisers to the ministers, advisers to the mayor, advisers for urban design and public administration—all of them work on the urban jigsaw puzzle, and none of them has all of the pieces. “Why don’t you go ask Jim . . . Bob . . . Bill,” they say to journalists. “He’s sure to have the data.”

For the past six months at least three people have been trying to discover how much money is spent on what in Saigon. “If you find out anything, just let us know,” says one of the “coordinators” cheerily. After all these years and at least four book-length academic studies on Saigon, the U.S. Mission has not the faintest outline of urban development priorities. It loses itself in Alice-in-Wonderland details. Since large numbers of Americans first moved into Saigon, the garbage has been piling up in the streets in great rich heaps like a bachelor’s laundry. Because of its inefficient, pre inflation wage policies, the government could not hire drivers for the few trucks that existed. For months USAID and the U.S. Embassy, spurred on by the cries of journalists and official visitors, struggled over the Great Garbage question. After long sessions at ambassadorial levels, they produced, first, a shipment of garbage trucks which hooligans stripped to their frames in the port before the relevant ministry could collect them, and second, an extraordinary payment system violating all U.S.-Vietnam ground rules. Now two thirds more garbage is collected in the city of Saigon. But there is also two thirds more garbage to collect. And the U.S. Mission cares about garbage extraordinarily. As for the city problems, the brutal answer seems to be that what does not bother Americans in their day-to-day lives slips unnoticed into the future indefinite.

Americans do not normally walk through the slums. Not the real slums, like those in the outlying areas (or four out of the eight districts of Saigon); beside which Bui Phat looks like paradise. Hidden within a tangle of canals, between main streets fronted with respectable houses, these slums are difficult to find, but are more revealing specimens for their isolation. Gigantic sewers, lakes full of stagnant filth, above which thatched huts rise on stilts, crammed together but connected by only a thin strip of rotting board. When Westerners walk the tightrope, women smile shyly from behind the windows and the children rush out—a hundred of them gather in an instant. They are not like the village children, these fierce, bored urchins who scream with hysterical laughter when a small boy falls in and flounders in the filth. Within a few moments they are a mob, shoving each other, clawing at strangers as if they were animals to be teased and tortured until . . . The anger comes up quickly behind the curiosity. A pebble sails out and falls gently on the stranger’s back. It is followed by a hail of stones.

Slums like these cover Saigon; slowly they curl out from the back alleyways to push across the main streets and the public land. If the city’s primary problem is squatters, the squatters’ problem is that they have nowhere to go. Since the high ground is already crowded, they can build only one on top of the other or in the marshes of the western districts, one of which the Viet Cong penetrate regularly in force. (The Viet Cong add somewhat to the overcrowding by moving into the city each night to avoid the bombing on the perimeter.)

On the northeast side of the city, from the airport to the American-built highway to Bienhoa, the land is either heavily settled, insecure, reserved for future military use, or restricted by a combination of these limitations. The three-volume plan for land reclamation and low-cost housing construction drawn up three years ago by Doxiades and Associates has been abandoned in toto. Today the mayor cannot even find the land on which to build a bus repair station or to move the squatters who block the major road to the port. Though
the government possesses a law of eminent domain, it does not use it because no one has enough confidence in the future of the piastra—or indeed, in the future of the government—to begin proceedings that are certain to last for eighteen months. An enforcement of the zoning laws, ancient as they are, is equally out of the question. Except for a small area of the Eighth District, administered by a group of dedicated young volunteers, not one square inch of land is being reclaimed for settlement. The District 8 project controls the only dredge. In the Fourth District, a marshy island behind the port, yearly fires sweep through the congeries of tin-roofed houses and thatched huts. Even after these disasters—"natural" urban renewal projects—the government does not move in; the rich corner a few square feet of mud for new concrete houses, and the poor take what is left to rebuild their thatched huts.

Public housing is something of a joke, even for the Minister of Public Works. By official count, 65 percent of all structures in Saigon are substandard—substandard for Saigon. With a population growth of 5 percent a year, the city must build 10,000 to 15,000 houses a year just to stay even, according to official calculations. Because of the high cost of land and building materials, only 2000 dwellings can be constructed if the most favorable circumstances prevail, which they never do. In past practice, low-cost housing, financed by revenue from the national lottery, has turned into middle-income housing for civil servants and their families—that is, until the civil servants moved in to find themselves without electricity, sewage disposal, or piped water, and moved out again, leaving the housing to really low-income groups. Even the District 8 project, the only self-help housing and welfare project in the city, and the government’s showcase for American visitors, suffers from the lack of the basic city services.

In urban Giadinh Province the government has, through the Revolutionary Development Ministry, managed to construct an entire hamlet with water, a school, and so forth. For lack of urban experience—the name of the Ministry is “Rural Construction” in Vietnamese—it has built a true hamlet with no agricultural land, miles away from the nearest center of employment, a patch of sad, regulated country in the midst of a city.

If an American should ask what his country has done for Saigon in the way of public service projects, the two principal answers are water and electricity. Since Americans care about electricity almost more than they care about cleanliness, the Viet Cong picked the optimum target when they blew out the transmission line from the hydroelectric plant in the north in May, 1965. For several months the city browned and blacked out day after day until the U.S. Mission brought in enough power by frantic borrowings of generators and gas turbines to handle the new demand, which in a year of the U.S. troop buildup had risen 16,000 kilowatts.

“You know,” said the Public Works Minister with a mocking smile, “last month we lifted the restriction on the use of air conditioners. You did not notice? Neither did I. Always the air conditioners have used up 25 to 30 percent of the city’s electricity.” Yet in large areas of the Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth districts, the only electricity to be seen at night is the light from the television set that Vice President Humphrey donated to the Eighth District project. Its generator alone would produce enough wattage for the whole subdistrict—if the inhabitants had enough money to install the lines and pay for the light.

Until this year, all the water in Saigon came from forty wells within the city limits; the wells were adequate until a million extra people started to drain them so that they threatened to draw in brackish water underground from the sea. The wells were good, but the antediluvian system of pipes so fouled the water that a U.S. handbook
advises government employees to boil it for an hour before using. But then, U.S. government employees live in a part of the city where there are pipes to carry the water; in most areas of the city water runs only through the public street fountains or comes in trucks at two plasters per forty liters.

To prevent imminent disaster, USAID has given the city a development loan to construct a large pump and a set of new pipes to bring water from the Bienhoa River; beginning this year with the installation of three main lines across the city, this clean new system with its increased pressure will burst all of the older pipes in town. In three years time, the new pipes will ramify into people's houses and the existing public fountains; perhaps at some future date they will reach the now waterless areas.

There are very few sewers. There are even fewer sewers that work. There are no plans to build sewers, because to build them to carry the new water supply would cost four times as much as the new water supply system itself.

Given its topography and a climate like that of New York or Washington in a perpetual summer, Saigon will never be a healthy city. Given the overcrowding, the lack of drainage, of sewage and garbage collection, it may rate as one of the least healthy cities in the world. According to the Dioxides study of 1963, not less than 10 percent of persons ten years and older has clinically significant pulmonary tuberculosis. The infant mortality rate at 36.2 percent is significantly higher in Saigon than in any other region of the country. Despite the massive inoculation program initiated by USAID and the World Health Organization, cholera, smallpox, and bubonic plague, as well as leprosy and typhoid, have become endemic to almost every population center of Vietnam, owing to the movement of refugees.

The diseases for which there are no vaccines—malaria, amoebic dysentery, eczema, worms, and an unspecified sort of swamp fever—will continue to kill people until living conditions show some improvement.

Though the city of Saigon has more hospital beds and outpatient clinics per person than any other area in the country (the proportion, however, is dropping), its facilities would collapse if its citizens recognized all of their symptoms and the benefits of Western medicine. Instead of taking the day off to wait for an examination in a government clinic, the people buy cheap, gaily colored Chinese medicines to treat what they think might be wrong with them.

A street away from a neighborhood clinic in the Fourth District a baby lolls in the arms of its ten-year-old sister, nodding and dull, half dead from the common dirt sores that cover its head. No, says the girl, my mother is not here, she is never here during the day. She works, she has worked since my father went away. The procession continues—the district chief and subdistrict leader ahead with the two Americans, the two district social workers mincing along behind, lifting the long white skirts of their ao dair out of the mud and looking neither right nor left. Near the market, vendors of soup, rice dishes, and green gelatin block the already crowded alleyways, serving their customers through a screen of flies.

A few feet further into the maze the procession stops before a small classroom packed with five- and six-year-olds. The inside is black during the middle of the day, and the children, elbow to elbow, are learning to read from comic books. When they see the visitors, they swarm out, falling all over each other, shrieking and howling. It is like breaking into the middle of an ant heap. The young teacher pushes through the melee. "It's a private school," he says. "I have six classes a day from the first grade on up."

The district chief smiles blandly at the Americans. "It's a school," he explains. "We have many schools in the district. Almost all of the children go to school. As I was saying, I lived in Paris for two years—Rue M—Do you know it?"

Saigon has a total of forty-four government primary schools which can contain 144,000 children on shifts of two to three hours a day. "Public opinion," writes the Ministry of Education, "has been most concerned about noon classes [11:00 to 2:00] because they are considered harmful to the children's health." To resolve "the acute problem of crowding in Saigon schools," the Ministry is in the process of building 478 more classrooms, none of which will accommodate new primary students. Although no one is counting, the number of children educated in public and private schools (of which latter the ant heap is generally representative) equals no more than half of the school-age population in Saigon.

Yet the Vietnamese government and USAID are proud of their primary school program. Over the next five years they plan to add to the 4000 public schools throughout the countryside to educate 65 percent of all children, including those of the Viet Cong. The accomplishment will be the more extraordinary for the fact that most of the new schools will, like their predecessors, go into the hamlets, where the war will demolish a good percentage of them within the year. Since not so much as a design exists for an urban two-story school, the 15 percent of illiterates may be concen-
In Vietnam the war has replaced the industrial revolution as the source of social welfare problems. With the great suddenness of urbanization, villages have disintegrated, families have splintered, and women with their children have been left to face the cities alone. In Saigon itself, educated guesses put the number of prostitutes at 29,000 and the number of juvenile delinquents at 200,000; as for the number of orphans, widows, cripples, beggars, psychotics, abandoned children, fire, traffic, and labor accident victims — the educated imagination boggles.

Confronted by this chaos, the Ministry of Social Welfare declares, "With respect to the nation, this Ministry intends to stir up by all ways and means people's patriotic and traditional virtues with a view to shoring up our national ethics, being on the verge of ruin... In respect of national philanthropy this Ministry will exhort everyone to try to solve all social problems on the basis of mercy." With due respect to the Ministry, whose views represent the intellectual consensus in this part of the country, it has lined itself up on the wrong side of history, a mistake of which the Viet Cong cannot be accused. Rather than introduce a coherent frame of reference, the United States is busily putting patches in a social fabric which its own presence in this country is helping to tear warp from woof.

After months of haggling, the Mission has finally recommended that an advisory team be sent to the Ministry of Social Welfare. Just what the team is supposed to do with the Ministry's budget of $2 million — 5 percent of which goes to Saigon — plus an untrained, ill-paid, and unconvinced staff, is questionable. If the team is energetic, the VIP's that trot through the Dickensian orphanages and welfare camps may succeed in raising an outcry to form a new study group to pressure the U.S. Mission to pressure Washington to finance and pressure the Ky government into doing something about it. In the meantime, the number of juvenile delinquents in Vietnam may continue to stay level with the number of American troops.

The statistics are but signals of urban metamorphosis. Though the Vietnamese can hear them, few know how to interpret them correctly. Throughout history the cities have belonged to the foreigners — to the Chinese governors, the overseas Chinese, and the French — the people of the metropolis. From Hué, the imperial city with its scale model of the Peking Summer Palace, to Cholon, the visual extension of commercial districts in Canton, to Saigon, with its planned avenues, its French provincial architecture, the cities reflect their past. Their foreignness clings to them; the Viet Cong speak of them as "out there" as opposed to "in here in the village." The urban intellectuals — a professor, a general, a sophisticated newspaper columnist — return to their villages each year (the war permitting) to take their place in the family hierarchy and, as it were, renew the terms of their foreign engagement.

For the four million Vietnamese who live in urban complexes, the city only half exists; it is merely a place, a transparency, through which they look back to the village. For the village was Vietnam. Within the village, the extended clan and traditional unit of government, a dense web of custom, religion, and family relation protected the individual and bound him to a system of mutual rights and duties. Under the mandarin and the nineteenth-century French administration, the central government rested as a light superstructure over the villages. Only after World War II did the Viet Minh, and afterward, the Diem regime, begin to break into the village organism, asserting governmental authority directly over the individual. Today, having accepted the modern conception of nationhood, the national government has not yet fully accepted its concomitants, the rights of a citizen and its own responsibility. In the countryside the powerful but essentially negative bureaucracy turns the villagers back upon themselves, upon what remains of the ancient web of the community. In the cities, where the web has disintegrated, the inhabitants, but particularly the new refugees, have nowhere to turn for justice, for material help, or for a promise of security.

In a sense, the foreigners still control the cities. By its intervention in the Vietnamese war and by its military tactics, the United States has created the urban situation. Whether or not the refugees came to find jobs, they came because of the war — not the Viet Cong activity in particular, but the war itself, the air strikes, the artillery fire, the gun battles, and the blockades between field and market. Although some cities, including Saigon, have taken measures to discourage further crowding, their populations continue to rise in almost direct proportion to the escalation of American military activity.

Quite apart from the aggressiveness of the new U.S. troops, the big American machinery, the artillery and bombs, the terror of war for the rural population increases not just in degree but in kind. While the U.S. forces have managed to kill im-
Pressing numbers of Viet Cong, neither they nor the ARVN have secured much of the territory they have swept and cleared.” In Binh Dinh Province, where American troops killed more than 1,500 Viet Cong in a multibrigade operation last February, the Viet Cong recaptured everything but the environs of a garrisoned district headquarters. Those inhabitants of the Anhao valley who did not leave their homes have stayed only to be shot at again. Unless either of the armies can lend more men to garrison duties, the demographic shift will continue to accelerate; large areas of land will be depopulated, and the cities will be overwhelmed.

One solution proposed by officials is that the armies should continue to herd villagers in from the countryside and isolate the Viet Cong. Because Vietnam is still an agricultural country, the economics of this draconian formula is worth considering. Until now, American units have operated mainly in the thinly populated regions of Central Vietnam; if the Command should send a force (up to three divisions have been mentioned) into the Fourth Corps area of the Delta, the rice bowl of Vietnam, where over a third of the population lives, it will have to deal with excruciating pressures on Saigon and the southern towns.

As the American troops have formed urban centers about themselves, so they have altered the cities and the lives of their inhabitants. In a country with no industrial base, one group of U.S. companies, RMK-BRJ — Raymond International of New York; Morrison-Knudsen of Boise, Idaho; Brown & Root of Houston, Texas; and J. A. Jones of Charlotte, North Carolina — is under contract to the U.S. Defense Department for construction projects costing more than the total Vietnamese GNP.

The combine employs 38,000 Vietnamese, more than any other organization except the Vietnamese Army. Not only in Saigon, but in all the port cities and inland bases like Bienhoa, Anhke, and Pleiku, the American presence has transformed the economic and social structure. With the flood of new demands for the short supplies of labor, services, and goods, the inflation mounts and the economy pulls away from its old moorings on the uneven tide of new money. For the elites on the army and civil service fixed wage scales, inflation has turned corruption from a luxury into a staple. Consumer goods imported by USAID to moderate the inflation effectively check industrial development; the new rich invest in services for the Americans. The Americans bid against one another for new quarters with water and electricity, and drive the Vietnamese from the best quarters of their own cities. Although in the long run the introduction of new ideas, new techniques, a new social mo-

bility may benefit Vietnam, the immediate influence of the U.S. Army is hallucinatory. Take one single block in Saigon with its traveling carnival of bar girls, carousing soldiers, madames, pimps, drunken merchant sailors, beggars, pickpockets, black marketers, shoeshine boys, gun-toting MPs, and surly cyclo drivers, then multiply by the force levels announced by the Pentagon. While embassy officials swat over “social frictions” and “incipient manifestations of anti-Americanism,” they view with suspicion Vietnamese proposals for an American University in Saigon.

“Too much American influence here already. The Vietnamese ought to develop their own national institutions.” Truly, the United States has no talent for colonialism.

Reluctant to take too overt a role in the management of Vietnamese affairs, the U.S. civilian agencies have played and continue to play Hamlet in the U.S. military’s production of Macbeth. Until 1962, USAID designed its policy in Vietnam according to its general principles: (a) loaning the government capital for long-range economic and “institutional” development and (b) extending credit to restore the country’s balance of payments. Called in by the Diem regime to work on the planning and execution of the Strategic Hamlet program, USAID began for the first time to operate within the governmental structure. While it hung back from assuming responsibility for the entire civil administration, USAID sent representatives to the provinces and began to initiate policies. Faced with a rural insurgency situation, planners decided that their first efforts should be given to winning over the peasants for the national government. Because at that time the urban populations were smaller, relatively isolated from the country people and from the ravages of war, they concluded that the cities could be left alone for the moment; in the countryside, they reasoned, their limited resources, unencumbered by major development projects, would stretch through a wide variety of small, inexpensive programs: school construction, pig rearing, agricultural extension, and so forth.

The planners put their faith in pacification. To support President Diem’s Strategic Hamlets, General Khanh’s New Life Hamlets, the Political Action Teams, and the Revolutionary Development cadre, they built bridges, pigpens, and schools, whether or not the army (or armies) could provide them with adequate security. In most cases they were, in effect, asking the peasants to risk their lives every day for the government out of sheer gratitude. Four years later and four years heavier in experience, staff, and investment, USAID still clings to its original brief for rural development as it teeters between its horror of overinvolvement and its fear of ineffectuality. Mean-

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while everything else has changed. The country under government control, following the sharp decline in security after the fall of the Diem regime, dwindled away to almost nothing by the spring of 1965; then the Americans entered the war.

At the Honolulu Conference last February, President Johnson and Premier Ky pledged their governments “to the attack on hunger, ignorance and disease” and “to the work of social revolution.” Although the pledges referred to all of the Vietnamese people, they naturally applied only to those people living under government control. As the cities and provincial capitals contain 60 to 70 percent of them as well as the central redoubts of “hunger, ignorance and disease,” it might have been assumed that the Honolulu Conference promised vast new urban and town development programs. From “the work of social revolution” it might have been inferred that the partner-governments planned reforms in the cities, where the progressive young leadership waits, now biding its time outside the civil service.

At his press conference of October 6, President Johnson spoke once again of last February’s Honolulu Conference, “which I considered very successful. At that meeting the government of South Vietnam re-enforced its determination to . . . multiply efforts in health, education, and agriculture particularly in the countryside.” (Italics added.)

In rural Vietnam the village gates which traditionally kept out the law of the emperor still remain to bar the way of modernization and nationalism. Only in the cities, where old habits and old loyalties are giving way under the pressures of the war, can General Ky put meaning into those tired words “social revolution.” Of course, if the United States and South Vietnam designed their Honolulu pledges with a mind to winning the rural population away from the Viet Cong, they might, for the sake of credibility, think to fulfill them in the areas they control. Today the cities are no longer isolated from the countryside; between the refugees and their relatives still living in the contested areas the communication is complete—and more persuasive than the radio. In the struggle against the forces of a real revolution, official unconcern for the cities can only stem from a belief that in this country where a citizen has so little to be thankful for, the twin benefits of security and safety, plus a large military force, suffice to ensure the cooperation of the urban populations.

Although the last few years have taken their toll in all of Vietnam, the refugees, more than anyone else, have understood the consequences for their country of a twentieth-century war. Driven from their lands and villages, they have dragged the full weight of their lives onto a new territory where they cannot take root. In the debris of villages around the shattered cities, they cling to the habits of a society that no longer exists; to their children, the first generation of city people in Vietnam, they can point out no alternative. Without education, without skills, without a structure for their lives, these children, if the war continues on its present course, will be the major source of internal trouble for the Republic of Vietnam.

The condition of the cities is critical, yet the Ky government and its American advisers have not looked past the old assumptions, the old incomplete programs into the whole process of urbanization. Though few Vietnamese will recognize it, the new generation of city children may look familiar to Americans who have spent time in their own city slums.

A STORY

by WILLIAM STAFFORD

After they passed I climbed out of my hole and sat in the sun again. Loose rocks all around make it safe — I can hear anyone moving. It often troubles me to think how others dare live where stealth is possible, and how they can feel safe, considering all the narrow places, without whiskers.

Anyway, those climbers were a puzzle — above where I live nothing lives.

And they never came down. There is no other way. The way it is, they crawl far before they die.

I make my hole the deepest one this high on the mountainside.