

FIELD TRIP OBSERVATIONS  
IN CENTRAL VIETNAM

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April 2, 1955

INTRODUCTION

On March 7, the writer of these notes started on his first field trip in Viet Nam, a trip lasting but four days. It was intended, in part, as a "feeler," to test the reports in Saigon on the difficulties of travel in the countryside. The officials of the Ministry of Agriculture, for example, took a dim view of the undertaking when first approached on the subject. If their advice had been followed, it would have meant travel in the company of the Minister of Agriculture, local big-wigs, both civilian and military, and all the fanfare attached to such a "safari." Security, presumably, was the excuse for their concern. Fortunately, wiser counsel prevailed, and the assistance of the Ministry was dispensed with. Instead we were accompanied by the English-speaking Mr. Do Trong Chu, of the Refugee Commissioner's office, and later joined by Mr. Tran Duc Nhuon of the USOM Regional Office in Hue, who proved himself to be a young man with superior knowledge of Central Viet Nam.

The purpose of the trip was to see something of the lay of the land of Viet Nam, to note the character of the village, and to get first hand impressions of the attitude of the farmers toward the land-rent control program about to commence. However, in the course of the trip other problems pressed themselves upon the visitors. They are part and parcel of the economic and political conditions of the countryside.

The party traveled north and east of Hue, then south of Tourane and from Tourane further south to the districts of Faifoo and Tam Ky. We visited four villages, of which two were under the Viet Minh for a number of years; three district offices; and paid calls on two Chiefs of Provinces. In the light of the experience gained on this trip, it appears that fears expressed by Saigon officialdom were grossly exaggerated. But it must be admitted that the time has not yet come when a curious foreigner, no matter how well intentioned, can drive into a village in search of information and gain the immediate cooperation of the farmers. This was particularly true of the former Viet Minh villages, where people look at you with suspicion and say very, very little. Under these circumstances the assistance of the District Officer is invaluable. His aid smooths the rough road toward any valid impression of past and present conditions in a given village. Talks with district officials (as with the Chiefs of Provinces) preceding the trips into the villages were in themselves invaluable. Officials gave the impression of close familiarity with local conditions, some of them having lived under the Viet Minh for years. Without their aid, the value of this trip would have been limited indeed.

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When one travels through the country and listens to accounts of the recent past, the illusion "security by day" becomes quite obvious. One could not help but face blown-up bridges; torn-up roads, particularly in the areas controlled or contested by the Viet Minh; and irrigation canals and dikes in disrepair. Everywhere we heard of the sharp decline in acreage and yields, and concern about the shape of things to come. As against the effects of recent events, we encountered much evidence of roads and bridges being rebuilt or new community houses replacing the ones burned down by the Viet Minh. We saw the teeming market towns and hosts of farmers streaming down from their hamlets, with lively waddling steps, carrying over their shoulders baskets of foodstuffs to the market. These signs of quickened activity were heartening to behold, but, on balance, and from the point of view of the region's farm economy and the struggle against the political legacy of the Viet Minh, the aftermath of the years of strife is very much in evidence and the effort to cope with it is only beginning to take shape.

#### THE VILLAGE AND THE PEOPLE

What is the village like and what are some of its problems?

A fundamental one, the small holding, was apparent even before we landed in Hue. From the plane; we observed a land configuration strikingly similar to that of Japan, Korea, or Formosa--small fields fitted together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. What was not familiar were the pockmarks with which some of the fields were crowded; upon closer examination they proved to be graves. Talks with farmers and local officials readily revealed that this section of Central Viet Nam, and indeed all of Central Viet Nam, is characterized by that well known feature that plagues so many other countries of Asia and the Middle East--too many people on too little land. Holdings of one hectare, a half hectare, or even less, broken up in a number of pieces and scattered in all directions are the prevailing pattern.

Thua Thien province, for instance, has an estimated 40,000 farm families, subsisting before the war on an estimated 33,300 hectares of cultivated land. If it is true that the pre-war area has shrunk to but 15,000 hectares due to war dislocations, the average size of a holding is small even by the crowded Asian standards. Conditions created by the war aside, the normal pattern of a single hectare or less is amply supported by evidence gathered in the villages. Ia Chu village, for example, is made up of 350 farm families, who divide among themselves a total of 200 hectares; of which 150 hectares are cultivated. In the village of Su Lo Dong, 400 families subsist on a total of 220 hectares, more than half of which is rice land.

While the cultivable acreage in this section of the country has never been large, it was reduced materially during the war years. The deterioration of irrigation facilities and of dikes and dams are cited as the primary cause. In the district of Phu Loc, 40% of the land

(1,800 hectares) is out of cultivation because salt water has seeped in through broken dams. The decline in the buffalo population is another important factor leading to the same result. By the same token, it is a significant index to the worsened economic condition of the farm community.

For many a farmer a buffalo is the most important source of wealth, its value being estimated from \$100 to \$200, depending upon the quality of the animal. For a tenant farmer, his buffalo is the principal tangible asset. His farm equipment doesn't cut much of a figure. The wood plow with the iron tip; the wooden harrow, the wooden roller, the brush cutting knife, the hoe, the scythe and the threshing basket—all these call for an investment of no more than \$25. And the information points to the fact that the buffalo population is roughly one-half to one-third of what it was before the civil war began in 1946. A decline in cultivated acreage was inevitable and, along with it, a decline in the "wealth" of the community.

The land of any given village is not all privately owned. Much of it is community-owned land. As in other instances involving quantitative delineations, the proportions of community and private land are not easily determined. If the guestimates are taken at their face value, the percentage of community land can be as low as 20 and as high as 80. Modern developments, mainly those tending to disrupt the old village pattern, account for the differences. Community land is redivided every three years and, theoretically, the standard of distribution depends upon the number and ages of the male members of a family. Every male between 18 and 60 is entitled to one unit of land, and males above 60 to one-half of a unit. In reality, there have been many instances when the village notables (a term applied to the appointed leaders) charged with the task operated on the theory that "To him who has, it shall be given." As a result, some farmers have hardly any land at all, and rent private or community land—from those who control it. The one restriction on community land is that it cannot be sold.

The economic well-being of the village revolves not only around the land it possesses as a unit, but also around the relationship of the cultivators to the land. But information on this crucial point is hard to get. Neither district officers nor villagers will shed much light on the subject. When a district officer was pressed for information, he finally resorted to his "Bible," a dog-eared statistical compilation published in 1931, with figures for the year 1929. The villages we visited had no recorded data, modern or ancient. Nevertheless, a farmer would shift his weight from foot to foot, think hard, and produce a figure. It was on this basis that we were left with the impression that approximately one third of the farmers are tenants, working somebody else's land.

Big landlords are a rarity in Central Viet Nam. The biggest we encountered was a chief of a province who owned 40 hectares rented out

to 80 tenants. The run-of-the-mill landlord is often one by courtesy. Two to three hectares will put him in that category; while men with 10 hectares are indeed substantial owners. Rentals, in normal times are approximately 50 per cent of the main crop if the landlord furnished seed and fertilizer, or 25 to 30 per cent of the crop if these items were furnished by the tenants.

The area here considered is not a typical landlord-tenant area, yet, in view of the fairly large number of tenants, one of the questions raised was whether or not a tenant is ever in a position to ascend the higher rungs of the agricultural ladder. The answer was invariably in the negative. The very question seemed to be out of order. And indeed it would be surprising, considering prevailing land prices on the one hand, and income on the other, for a tenant to acquire a piece of land on his own. Farmers assured us that there were virtually no land transactions of any kind. Clearly, the uncertainties of war and the Viet Minh position with respect to the land question, about which more later, were in themselves powerful factors discouraging transfer of land. It is all the more surprising, therefore, that land prices are very high, judging by such quotations as 100,000 to 140,000 piastres per hectare or roughly \$600 to \$800 (1). When the farmers are asked "Why so high?" the reply, as one put it, was that "a box of matches now costs two piastres, whereas before the war the price was only one centime." But whatever the cause of high land values, it is quite clear that in the decade since the end of the Second World War no tenant could possibly accumulate enough to buy even a portion of a hectare. He could not do that not only because he works a small holding, but also because the yield of his main crop is only one ton per hectare, or approximately one third the average of Japanese rice yields. Moreover, because they work such small holdings and the yields are so low, tenants as well as small farm owners produce only enough rice to last them from four to six months. They buy whatever additional rice they can through the sale of other products on the local market, but a great many of them cannot get their fill of the foodstuff they want most.

Taxation is a burden about which farmers the world over complain. It was a novel experience, therefore, to find that the farmers we talked to felt taxation was no problem. The reason is simple: While the farmers pay indirect (sales) taxes, or stamp charges when they file or register an occasional document, in 1955 they will pay no direct taxes. Even the land tax, which is only 150 to 200 piastres per hectare, will not be collected this year. The entire pre-war taxation system fell into disuse in the past decade or so, and in Viet Minh occupied areas the new taxation practices disappeared with the departure of the Viet Minh. However, the Viet Minh did succeed in collecting taxes in 1954, hence the decision of the National Government not to impose any taxes in 1955, on the ground that the farmers should not be taxed twice.

(1) Piastres converted into dollars at the unofficial rate of exchange.

The same practice will apply in non-Viet Minh occupied villages. The restoration of the taxation system will come with the return of normalcy, but for the time being, this is one item which doesn't seem to trouble the farmers.

Farm indebtedness, too, is evidently no great problem at the moment. We were not prepared for this situation because traditionally the farmers carried a heavy burden of indebtedness. The whole population, a noted scholar once remarked, is caught in a "tightly drawn network of loans and debts." This statement referred to Indo-China in general and Central Viet Nam was no exception. And one of the classic reasons for this pre-war state of affairs was: "The people of Annam (Central Viet Nam) would try to borrow up to the extreme limit of their credit." How is it then that the question of indebtedness is no great issue now? The answer lies not in the prosperity of the village, but in the virtual drying up of sources of credit. In saying this, no attempt is made to equate availability of credit with heavy and burdensome indebtedness, and thus argue against the creation of sound credit facilities; the fact is that it is not indebtedness that is the evil, but excessive indebtedness for unproductive purposes.

Whether the farmers employ credit wisely, or whether the existence of credit creates burdensome debt, were not the points discussed with the farmers. What we were trying to ascertain was whether they needed credit, and, if so, how they could secure it. Opinion is unanimous on the critical need for: a) short-term credit during the growing, harvesting and marketing periods; b) intermediate term credit for investment in livestock; and c) long-term credit for a variety of land improvement activities undertaken individually or collectively. For most farmers, however, especially the small marginal cultivators, securing a loan is well-nigh impossible under present conditions. An occasional loan is still obtainable in the form of rice, secured three to four months before the harvest at the rate of 130 kgs. for every 100 kgs. borrowed.

In pre-war days, the money lender was the principal source of credit. But, if the farmers are to be believed, he has practically disappeared in the turbulence of civil war. Also, the few well-to-do have left the villages for the cities for security reasons, and the net result is a vacuum which no one has yet begun to fill. Occasionally a farmer does buy a buffalo, or manages to obtain a loan in an emergency; in such cases the farmer must rely on family connections to tide himself over. The poverty of the average farmer is an additional handicap for securing a loan for the simple reason that "no one but a fool or philanthropist will lend to a pauper." In the villages we visited there are probably some fools, but evidently not monied ones, and surely no philanthropists.

A striking feature of the trip was the market centers. They convey the impression of a bustling money economy, but as far as the majority of the farmers are concerned, the impression is more apparent than real. Little money changes hands, except when a buffalo is sold, or at the

cock-fight on the fairgrounds of the city of Tam Ky where a relatively small but obviously dedicated circle of spectators flashed wads of bills as tokens of their confidence in the fighting spirit of this cock or the other. But as we watched the average farmer selling fruit, vegetables, eggs, chickens or an occasional piglet and exchanging the proceeds for other necessities, it was obvious he would return to his village with little cash, if any. A visit to a farmstead completes the picture. Exceptions notwithstanding, in most cases the familiar hut made of local grass and brush is bare of worldly goods. A rough-hewn bedstead is the most likely piece of furniture, while a bench, a few earthen pots, a change of clothing and a brood of half-naked children complete the picture. "Porgy and Bess" could provide the theme song for many of the farmers of Central Viet Nam--"I've got plenty of nothin' and nothin's plenty for me". It doesn't call for an elaborate study of the standard of living to say with fair certainty that the Vietnamese standard is certainly way below that of the Japanese farmer, and below that of the Korean, Formosan, Burmese and Filipino farmer. They come closest to the level of certain groups of Indian farmers.

Free Viet Nam is ablaze with slogans, and one of the most commonly encountered is that "Literate people make a powerful nation." This emphasis, if backed by deeds, is well taken, for the educational facilities of rural Central Viet Nam are conspicuous by their absence. In this respect, the area does not stand alone; other Asian and Middle Eastern farmers share the same problem with their Vietnamese counterparts. Yet in the light of the drive for elementary education in many Asian countries, it seems that the region we traversed is remarkable for its lack of educational facilities.

If we are to believe the notables of La Chu Village, there is only one school to every forty villages of the district! It is not so bad in other districts where the proportion of schools to villages was variously estimated at one to five, one to ten, and one to fifteen. Nobody voiced any objection to school or schooling, and one of the elders gravely observed that "the fight against illiteracy is as important as the fight against hunger." Yet, even in the relatively well-off village mentioned above (Nobody there, the notables assured us, is either too rich or too poor.) there did not seem to be any interest in spending any money on teaching the three R's to the young. The school we saw in the city of Tam Ky was a very simple affair: a blackboard, a few benches and a few tables, all open to the weather, since the thatched roof was supported only by four corner posts. The arrangement did not appear to be an expensive one even for the poor villages of Central Viet Nam. The real reason for lack of schools, one suspects, lies in the inertia of the farmers themselves and of their leaders.

It is worth emphasizing in this connection that farmers and officials alike have words of praise for the efforts of the Viet Minh. According to their accounts, the Viet Minh was the most active in creating school facilities and finding local talent to spread literacy. This is



reflected also in official statements. A Vietnamese document "Concerning the Economic, Political and Cultural Problems of Tam Ky and Request for Aid" has this to say: "Tam Ky is a large district with a population of 300,000. Before 1945 there were four primary schools (one school for boys and for girls at Tam Ky; one for boys at An-Tan, and one for boys at Chien-Dan). Under the Viet Minh regime there were three secondary public schools, two private secondary schools and 100 private and public primary schools. The people need more and more education, and their standard of education must become higher and higher. If we cannot satisfy the people in this matter, it will result in a political defeat for the National Government because people are comparing the educational activities of the Viet Minh with that of the National Government." Our informants bemoaned the fact that with the departure of the Viet Minh, educational activities slackened. It appears, nevertheless, that neither the local administration nor private citizens have seen any need to fill the breach.

Such, in the main, were our hasty impressions of this particular rural section of Central Viet Nam. Land holdings are small and not too fertile, and the people cultivating them eke out a poor living. They are faced with all the problems associated with such conditions. If these chronic, rather than temporary, conditions were bad before the war, they are unquestionably worse now. This is true also of the areas which were never physically occupied by the Viet Minh. The Viet Minh affected the countryside as a whole, although their influence was felt to a greater degree in the areas under their occupation. In the latter, the small number of well-off farmers have gone through a leveling process which placed them alongside the mass of the farmers. Mr. Chao, Deputy Chief of the District of Tam Ky, formerly a Viet Minh strong-hold, was probably right when he observed: "In our villages there are no more rich and poor people; there are only equally poor people."

The economics of equalization downward is quite obvious and needs no comment. Less obvious but nonetheless significant are the effects of the Viet Minhization process on the multitude of farmers and their attitude toward the National Government and its activities. The land-rent control program initiated by the National Government is, at least in part, a case in point. What the Viet Minh has done in this field has important bearing upon the program considered in the subsequent paragraphs.

#### THE LAND REFORM PROGRAM

In January and February 1955, President Diem issued a number of ordinances inaugurating the land-rent control program in Viet Nam, commonly referred to as the "land reform program." Its principal provisions are:

- 1) Rentals from 15 to 25 per cent of the major crop; owners of the poorer land are to be compensated at the former rate while owners of good land are to be compensated at the latter rate.

2) The tenants must pay additional charges for the use of the landlord's work animal (not to exceed 12 per cent of the crop), and the actual cost—plus 12 per cent annual interest rate—of seed and fertilizer, if such are furnished by the owner. 3) The rental terms will be specified in a written contract, covering a period of three to five years. 4) The implementation of the program is to be carried out by elected committees of tenants and landowners in each of Viet Nam's 350 cantons, 102 districts and 34 provinces. 5) Resettlement of farmers on private lands abandoned by the landlords or on Government-owned land. Priority rights are given to refugees, former tenants, heirs of war heroes, war veterans and non-farmers who wish to take up that occupation. Considering the exorbitant pre-war rentals, the implementation of the program should benefit the tenants and provide them with a considerable measure of relief from arbitrary actions on the part of the landlords, as well as a degree of security of tenure.

What are the realities in the light of this reasonable assumption? How important is the program to the farmers? How significant is the program politically? Is the program being implemented? These were the questions addressed to landlords, tenants, and local officials.

It is too early to give definitive answers. The fears and hopes engendered by the recent past have so proliferated in the minds of the tenants that they are hardly in a position now to see the reform in the clear-cut terms. Yet a preliminary assessment may be made subject to correction implicit in the limitation just noted. Weighing the pros and cons, it appears to this observer that the tenants do not look upon the program as one of overriding importance. The economic advantages seem to them less impressive than one might have expected at first glance. The political aspects do not concern them, although the officials believe that politically the National Government stands to gain from the application of the Land Reform Ordinances. The position of the landlords is one of favoring the reform on both grounds; if the ordinances are enforced, they will naturally benefit from them. They collected next to no rent under the Viet Minh and the chance of actually receiving rent, albeit a reduced one, is indeed welcome.

The program was inaugurated in February and by early March the farmers had only a hazy idea what it was about. Few farmers could state the most essential provisions of the program. Some had vague notions—and no more. If they knew more about it, they probably would not overlook a weakness of the program, the relative ease with which the landlord could recover the land after the expiration of the contract. On at least two occasions, farmers assumed that the program dealt with land ownership and land distribution, which, of course, it does not. The printed posters with the brief outlines of the rent-control scheme had yet not reached the villages. District officials, on the other hand, were familiar with the law's provisions, but, being few in number, they had no time to spread the word or to explain and impress upon the farmers the meaning of the reform. To correct this, the chiefs of provinces are beginning to select

groups of young people for future work on the local level. The time element and shortage of personnel, rather than deliberate lack of interest on the part of the officials, were partial causes for the lack of activity and the impression that these measures are not of very great significance. Time may correct these shortcomings which, incidentally, have also shown themselves in countries with much better administrative organizations, where there had been a more thorough preparation for tasks of a somewhat similar nature.

More disturbing is the lukewarm attitude toward the program on the part of those on whose behalf it was initiated and who do know that rent reduction is its essential part. When a farmer is asked to state the needs which truly matter to him, rent control is virtually ignored, as if the rent problem did not exist. The number one item the farmers (and the officials) invariably mention is better irrigation facilities, followed by requests for aid in reconstructing dikes and dams, and in purchasing water pumps. Fertilizer and credit are next on the priority list. It has usually been necessary for the inquiring observer himself to raise the land rent question in order to solicit answers. Hardly ever did the farmers react to the reform as if it were a "felt-need."

Why this appearance of unconcern, a position sharply in contrast with that of other farmers in Asia when the land question is under consideration? The answer to this question appears to be twofold. The first reason--one of relatively small importance--is the type of landlordism prevailing in that section of the country. The second explanation, and by far the more important one, lies in the consequences of the land reform and political activities of the Viet Minh.

As to first--and at the risk of repetition--it is well to stress that in this region landlordism of a kind that gives rise to great political upheavals is absent. Excessive concentration of land ownership is unknown, and absentee landlordism is not a common feature. Landlords' holdings are too small to place them in a category of exploiters living in ease at the expense of the tenants. Even in appearance they can hardly be distinguished from other farmers working in the field or taking part in village affairs. To this should be added that much of the land is community owned--not privately owned. A landlord can rent out the land, but he does not own it and his instinct of unbridled proprietorship of land is somewhat watered down. Under the circumstances, the average landlord in this part of Central Viet Nam is far from the classic Asian landlord symbol wielding unlimited economic and political power in his community.

The tenant's attitude is but a reflection of the above conditions. Community-owned land provides him with a holding, even if it is only one-tenth of a hectare. Since the total cultivated acreage of a village is very small, the additional land he rents is also small. As a renter, he has grievances against the landlord, but they are tempered by the fact that he deals with a man who may be only one step removed from his

condition. The tenant will surely be helped by reduction in rent; such gains, however, depend not only upon the newly fixed rentals but also upon the size of the holding he rents. Since that is notoriously small, from an economic point of view the gain cannot be very great. It is not unnatural, therefore, that to some tenants the importance of measures resulting in increased production on his small holding seems more meaningful than rent reduction. For the same reason, they would point to South Viet Nam, where land is more plentiful, as the place where a rent reduction program should have much wider scope.

The above is only one minor aspect of the problem. The land-rent reduction need not have great urgency in order to be received very warmly by the tenants of this part of Central Viet Nam. Every additional measure of rice is a gain; every deficit rice producer is cognizant of that—and they are all deficit producers. The ordinances would have ushered in a highly significant event but for the fact that the Viet Minh had taken the edge off this greater expectation by the implementation of "reforms" of their own throughout most of this area. This is probably the most telling reason why the idea and content of the National Government reform measures are not new, and, above all, lack the impact they would have had in Central Viet Nam even though land reform there is not a do-or-die issue. A tenant's list of priorities would have been quite different if the present reduction scheme was immediately supplanting the pre-war arrangement whereby the rent charges amounted to about half of the crop.

Landlords, tenants and officials are well aware of the Viet Minh's agrarian policies. While they cannot describe the changes and twists of the Viet Minh's agrarian policies covering nearly a decade, they have had a great deal of experience with Viet Minh rent reduction schemes, outright confiscation of land belonging to "traitors" and to absentee landlords and the like. Thus, the Viet Minh reform became a household word in occupied and non-occupied areas. Different groups were differently affected by their measures, but the attitude was not formed solely by economic considerations. This is an important point in any attempt to evaluate the position of the tenants and their half-hearted acceptance of President Diem's measures. It explains also their reluctance to talk about their experience under the Viet Minh.

The landlords were willing to share their experience. The big landlord of 40 hectares lived under Viet Minh for nine years and now is chief of one of the provinces. As a resident landlord, he was never dispossessed of his land. Soon enough the land became a burden he wished to shed, but the Viet Minh would not permit it. They preferred him (and other resident landlords) to continue renting out land to tenants, but, of course, on the Viet Minh's own terms. These terms, according to his account, meant a rental of 15 per cent of the main crop, out of which he had to pay a tax in kind amounting to 90 per cent of the rental. For all practical purposes, he received almost no rent at all, and was hardly better off than the absentee landlord whose land was confiscated and distributed

among the tenants. His continued titular ownership was a source of unrelieved hardship to the landlord, but it served the Viet Minh well: he was maintained as a handy political target and a source of the economic wherewithall to help keep the Viet Minh going.

The tenant's testimony is less explicit and more contradictory. He admits to the burdensome Viet Minh terms under which he worked the land, but he is not often critical of his former masters. When the information is pieced together, it would appear that tenants of resident landlords paid rents ranging from 15 to 20 per cent of the crop, while tenants who received plots of confiscated land paid no rent at all to the Viet Minh. In both cases, however, the Viet Minh imposed taxes in kind. The size of the tax burden was difficult to determine, for no two accounts agreed. Some tenants stated that it was as high as 50 per cent of their output, while others said it was no more than 10 per cent, depending upon the family's size. There were occasional extra "contributions" when the Viet Minh was especially hard pressed for grain. Taken altogether, the inescapable impression is that the Viet Minh exacted a heavy price for the privilege of owning a piece of land or renting land from virtually dispossessed resident landlords. It is the more surprising, therefore, to note the following comments by the anti-Viet Minh Chief of a District: "The poor farmer, although paying 50 per cent of the crop as a land tax, is much better off than the landlord. Thus the poor farmer has benefited from the Viet Minh regime. Poor farmers support the Viet Minh regime because its army is made up of poor farmers. Even if the farmers are no better off economically, they are much better off politically. They are the power in the village." A variation on the same theme is contained in another comment picked at random from the observer's notebook: "Under the Viet Minh regime the poor farmers are in no better economic condition, but they are happy because they are more important in the village, while the landlords are becoming poorer and have lost their former prestige and importance."

These and similar statements emanate from the local officials as they attempt to describe the effects of the Viet Minh upon the farmers. Farmers who have been through the Viet Minh school tend to keep to themselves their innermost thoughts on Viet Minh practices. The suggestion that the fear of possible reprisal from Viet Minh agents dictates this position is only a partial explanation, according to the local officials. There are deeper causes.

The assumption that a fuller or full stomach is the sole mainspring of a poor farmer's attitude towards a political entity is of doubtful validity. The Communists, who glory in the principle of economic determinism, have enough appreciation of realities not to overlook the fact that not all realities are economic; that non-economic, psychological and political factors, may in the final analysis motivate man's behavior. It has been correctly said that "Where political-psychological motivations come into conflict with desires for better economic well being, the priority of the political is generally rather clear."

More specifically, ideas of equality, respect and status in the community weigh heavily in the scales of the awakened nationalism which has been exploited by the Viet Minh over the years. Illiteracy is no barrier to an emotional acceptance of these ideas. The fact that these concepts are only tactics to be discarded by the Communists at a later date either does not occur to the farmer or is beyond his comprehension. But the assiduous hawking of such palatable notions has created a "Viet Minh legacy" now shared, according to estimates of local officials, by approximately 50 per cent of the farmers of Central Viet Nam. This may, in large measure, explain the seeming paradox of farmers who view with skepticism the economic benefits offered them by President Diem's reform shortly after they have escaped the economic burdens imposed upon them by the Viet Minh.

Even if these observations are perfectly valid, it would still be premature to conclude, at this early stage, that the implementation of the program is doomed to failure. It is possible that the anti-Viet Minh feeling among the landlords, owner-cultivators and a segment of the tenants may yet play an important role in shifting the balance toward acceptance of President Diem's reform by the majority of tenants. It would be a mistake, however, to assume this would take place without strong prodding. The program is getting off to a slow start, while the Viet Minh agents and Viet Minh ideas continue to exert considerable influence in the countryside. Speeding up the program calls for an enormous amount of effort on the part of the national and local governments. This work must be essentially of a political nature, if for no other reason that the standoffish position of so many of the tenants is essentially political, too.

Promulgation of the land reform ordinances by the National Government was in itself a political action. Local officials are agreed that this action will counter to some degree the claims of the Viet Minh that they alone are the spokesmen of the poor farmers. But the Viet Minh hold the advantages of having been the first in the field. To overcome this handicap, the National Government must move beyond the mere promulgation of the reform measures. There is no evidence that the Government had wholeheartedly thrown itself into a continuing campaign of demonstrating its abiding interest in this program. Apathy is the dominant note, and the best explanation that can be offered is that that attitude is an expression of the political vacuum so characteristic of the countryside. The current political difficulties and the concentration of all top executive effort on immediate, urgent problems is understandable. On the other hand, this limited land reform program is also a political matter not unrelated to "pure" political issues.

These observations are not aimed at an assessment of the rent reduction scheme as such, yet it may not be out of place to note the program's limitations. One may venture to say also that the same criticism would hold true even if the Viet Minh had not staked their claim to being the original land reformers in Indo-China, and even if the scope of the

National Government's measures went so far as to make land ownership and land distribution its primary aim.

The statement is based on the very strong impression that in the section of Central Viet Nam under review one can see an excellent example of the crude oversimplification which presents "land reform" as a cure-all. The Communists have given currency to this particular idea and the idea has been uncritically accepted in non-Communist circles chiefly because it offers a simple solution easily propagandized. The small size of holdings and relatively poor soil conditions are in themselves warnings against the all-encompassing proposition that all benefits flow from ownership or reasonable rental terms. Such measures, no matter how liberally drawn, can neither increase the size of the holding nor materially raise the productivity of the soil. Yet these are fundamental. In order to overcome these drawbacks, "land reform" in Central Viet Nam (as in other regions and other countries) must give way to "agrarian reform," a term which stands for the improvement of all economic and social institutions connected with farm life.

Rural Japan is case in point. The Japanese land distribution program has been quite successful not merely because the tenants became owners of the land, but chiefly because such ownership has been accompanied by a strong farm cooperative movement, a sound credit system, a network of highly developed agricultural policies, particularly price policies, designed to protect the agricultural economy of the country. The net result of the incentive offered by ownership, plus the means of maintaining the productivity of the land at high levels have made the land reform meaningful economically, politically and socially.

Under the prevailing farm conditions in Central Viet Nam, a farmer cannot expand the size of his holding through increased agricultural production. This is not an argument against land reform of a limited or wider scope; it merely stresses the fact that to this important precondition must be added the other means for bringing about more efficient use of the land and of human resources. The marginal farmers' pleas for irrigation facilities and credit are an extension of the idea that independent, self-reliant producers and citizens are not created simply by shifting the pattern of ownership. Unless the much improved land-rent situation, or even outright ownership, go hand in hand with all the other necessary improvements, the farmers may not be much better off than they were in pre-reform days. In the Viet Nam of today this idea may be easily dismissed on the ground of more urgent priorities, but only at the risk of a doleful shape of things to come in the country's economy and politics. It would be wiser for the National Government to consider this problem some time soon, before it is too late.

POLITICAL NOTE

Land reform and farm conditions are political issues. The Russian and Chinese Communists have succeeded in projecting the land problem into the very center of Asian politics. The Communists have been able to capitalize on the landlord-tenant strife with startling success by posing as advocates of reforms for the benefit of the peasantry. The Viet Minh followed in the footsteps of their masters, successfully preaching the same gospel. The accounts of officials and landlords may have exaggerated the Viet Minh's hold on the people, perhaps, in part, to underscore the magnitude of the task facing the new administrators. However, even when this factor is taken into consideration, the persistence of ideas implanted by the Viet Minh cannot be denied.

It has been suggested that non-economic ideas were largely responsible for the Viet Minh's strength in the community. Their method of "selling" their wares was one of a tremendous and unceasing political activity which kept the countryside seething with excitement; even anti-Viet Minh officials and landlords expressed grudging admiration for the Communists' organizational ability and their political acumen in exploiting to the fullest advantage every exploitable issue. As one official remarked: "They made greatest political capital of the land issue, but it was not only the land. Everything the Viet Minh touched was political: the creation of educational facilities, repair of roads, tax collections, army behavior, or capital punishment meted out to a "criminal" farmer—all of these and much else were carefully explained on the ground of political necessity." The Viet Minh were, in effect, engaged in a continuous process of trying to convince the common people that their interests were identical with those of the Viet Minh and vice-versa. Significant also is the evidence that the Communists were able to mobilize local talent to carry out their multifarious activities.

If the above observations gathered in the field are correct, there is cause for concern on the part of the National Government regarding the striant state of political activity in the countryside, or rather the lack of it. A brief visit in Central Viet Nam convinces one of the existence of a political vacuum, as wide as the countryside we traversed. Worried officials recognize the fact that no new content is being poured into the vacuum created by the physical disappearance of the Viet Minh. The province and district offices and city streets are decorated with all kinds of slogans and homilies on the virtues of hard work, patriotism, good citizenship, thrift, honesty, literacy and the like. These are all desirable attributes, but in the light of the pressing realities the inescapable impression is that this sloganizing does not move much beyond the space the slogans fill.

The more one listens to the tales of woe of an intelligent and well-intentioned chief, the more one comes to believe that his office is but an island within a peasant ocean, the latter hardly affected by the former. There is no evidence that the persistence of Viet Minh



influence has induced the national and local governments to attack the crucial political tasks with all the urgency and seriousness they deserve. The often mentioned handicap, shortage of trained personnel, cannot be taken seriously as an excuse. This is an unsubstantiated charge--and it did not take the Viet Minh to disprove it. Trained personnel is not born. The Vietnamese do not lack the main ingredient, native intelligence; what is needed is leadership to harness ability for the building of the new state. It will not be harnessed and put to work with zest and dedication unless the top leadership takes the people into its confidence in words and in a spirit which neither overlooks the harsh facts of life and the people's deeper aspirations, nor fails to inspire the people to a willingness to come to grips with their problems regardless of the cost. Mere slogans and propaganda directed against the Viet Minh are not enough to save the day in the coming Battle for Viet Nam.

The chore will not be an easy one in Central Viet Nam. The French are responsible for the security of that part of the country. Their presence is conspicuous throughout the area. Without referring to security problems, it suffices to say that the presence of the French Army makes it much more difficult to convince the people that Viet Nam is truly independent. Within sight of continuous traffic of French troops of many colors and origins, a Vietnamese nationalist has a difficult time convincing the people that the Viet Minh has bartered away the country's independence to a foreign creed espoused by Russia and China. Hence the difficulty of the task and the need of a supreme effort to put the best face on an apparent contradiction.

This political problem will persist as long as the French are in Central Viet Nam, but there is yet another immediate problem which is very much on the mind of virtually every local official who is eager to establish closer relations with the farmers. This is the unfriendly attitude of the farmers toward the National Army. According to available information on the spot, the political arm of the Viet Minh Army saw to it that the relations between the Viet Minh soldiers and the farmers were close and friendly. In this effort, the Viet Minh met with success. The propaganda slogan that the army fights the peasants' battles might not have sufficed, but the behavior of the soldier evidently carried conviction. Although they taxed the farmers and lived off the land, the officials would have us believe that many a farmer forgave the Viet Minh soldier as "a father an erring son." This is apparently no mere figure of speech, for the Viet Minh soldier entering a farmhouse would address the farmer as "father," his wife, "mother," and the children as "brother" and "sister." It would appear that the Viet Minh admonition to their soldiers that "You are the fish and the people are the water" was not without effect.

On balance, in the eyes of the people we talked to, the National Army suffers by comparison. One of the district chiefs spoke bluntly when he stated that "The soldiers of the National Army maltreat the people and they naturally do not like it. They do like the Viet Minh

Army which is looked upon as a people's army protecting the people." To substantiate the charge, he pulled out a dossier of cases of soldier misbehavior, some of which were trivial and others most serious.

The deep concern with the position of the National Army in the community is understandable. They equate the National Government with its army. With the local administration uneasily feeling its way into the village, the army could become a powerful link between the Government and the people. How can this be achieved, we asked a very troubled chief of a province? Without hesitation he replied as follows: "If you see President Dien upon your return to Saigon deliver this message in my name: What the National Army needs today is not so much military training as political training and of the latter it gets none. Military training is relatively easy, but political training is difficult. It will be successful only when the people accept the army as their own. The army will have fulfilled its mission only when the farmer invites a soldier and treats him as another farmer's son away from home." These are sentiments born of a tragic experience and of an appreciation of the urgent political tasks and tests which lie ahead.

There are other means of making political capital. The land reform of the National Government is one of those "other means," as well as the first attempt to translate one of the aspirations of the farmers into political language. For reasons discussed elsewhere, this land reform phase may fall short of the anticipated results. Hence the pressing need to raise the status of the farmers by attempting to satisfy some of the human wants about which they feel so keenly.

It is not the purpose of this "political note" to outline a plan of action, although if the picture of a village in Central Viet Nam, is close to reality, then the question of what to do is fairly clear. What needs to be emphasized here is that the conscious and yet unsatisfied wants constitute, what one writer aptly termed, "the revolution of rising expectations." In a politically conscious Viet Nam, engaged in a bitter struggle with the Viet Minh, it would be doubly dangerous to delay indefinitely the partial realization--at the very least--of some of the expectations. The price of inaction might eventually be Communist action.

This observer is not without awareness of the serious political conditions now prevailing in Viet Nam: of the "state within the state" phenomenon exemplified by the so-called religious sects; of the National Government's exercising only limited power in the countryside; of provincial governments governing poorly, and of local, grassroots administration honeycombed with Viet Minh holdovers and steeped in Viet Minh influence. Nor is the country in a good economic state, depending as it does upon American economic aid to a major degree. The normal reaction to this state of affairs is reluctance to seize and direct the "revolution of rising expectations." The position is a mistaken one because the political vacuum cannot be filled unless the

questions of a more adequate standard of living, a greater sense of security, a greater sense of freedom of participation, a deeper sense of belonging and similar basic human wants are at least actively pursued. The availability or lack money is indeed important, but at this particular juncture the inspired expression of understanding these issues is of the highest importance. Not everything must be done for the people of Viet Nam; there is much that they themselves could do by themselves if their sense of responsibility were aroused and they were given opportunities to exercise it. But to achieve that end the National Government must come closer to the people; it must put all its cards before the people—the good, the bad and the very worst—and seek their support and advice. It must, of course, convincingly identify itself with the things that truly matter to the people. If that is done, the pro-Viet Minh sentiments might well become a memory, and the people might even come to understand and accept the fact that not all their deeply-felt needs can be realized in short order. The faith and hope that they are moving in the desired direction, and are taking part in a task in which they believe, these matter most, even if the process is a slow and difficult one and the immediate rewards are meager.

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Upon return from the field trip, the writer of these observations had the privilege of discussing his impressions with President Diem. The principal points at issue, including the role the President himself might play in dealing with them, have been conveyed to him.

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