

VIETNAM!

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At the moment the United States finds herself embroiled, directly and indirectly, in conflicts in three different parts of the world. She is fighting in Vietnam, Communist-watching in the Dominican Republic and playing a curious role in the internal affairs of the Congo. Not since the days of Teddy Roosevelt and his Big Stick has the United States been so militarily involved in a time of, technically, peace.

Of these conflicts, the largest and bloodiest is the Vietnamese war. And the United States must bear, as even the firmest supporters of the present administration's policy admit, a great deal of the responsibility for that unfortunate country's agony.

Although Vietnam's past is shrouded in legend, its traditions go back a long way. It was founded about 500 B.C., and known as Van Lang. The kingdom's fate depended on the strength of the Chinese empire to the north; and with the rise of the powerful Han dynasty in China, Vietnam was overrun and ruled as a Chinese province from 111 B.C. to about 940 A.D.

Many refugees from the mainland settled in Vietnam during this period and introduced Chinese writing skills, philosophy and even social customs into the area. However, the Vietnamese succeeded in maintaining their national identity, and the long period of Chinese rule was interrupted by rebellions—successful but short-lived.

However, as the Chinese presence became more brutal and opposition to the regime built up, a rash of rebellions in 938, coinciding with the decline of the Tang dynasty in China, led to the defeat of the Chinese in 940.

Once free of the Chinese, the Vietnamese proceeded to over-run the kingdom to the south of them, which occupied roughly the area now occupied by South Vietnam. Land thus gained was given to farmers willing to defend it. But as the Vietnamese moved south and west they neglected to occupy the country's highlands. Today

close to 29 million people live on the narrow delta, while the remaining 1.5 million occupy the upland areas which make up about 80 per cent of the land.

The unequal distribution of Vietnam's mineral and agricultural resources makes the two zones perfect complements to each other in peacetime. To the north lies the mineral wealth; to the south, the fine agricultural land. The present sealing-off of each zone at the 17th parallel has imposed costly expenditures on both sides, since each zone's deficiencies have had to be made up somehow. And in both zones, these expenditures have necessitated heavy dependence upon external aid.

Vietnam was never an especially profitable area to rule. The reason why France kept the colony is explained by the French historian Henrie Brunshwig.

"The colonies were not supposed to be sources of revenue. Their role consisted in disrupting the mastery of the seas with Britain and affirming to the face of the world the presence, the grandeur, and the rayonnement of France. It was normal that all this was to be paid for, like all expenditures of sovereignty."

But this attitude was hardly designed to improve the lot of the colonized peoples. Franklin D. Roosevelt attacked France's policy in Vietnam in these terms: "France has had Indochina—30 million inhabitants—for nearly 100 years, and the people are worse off than they were at the beginning . . . France milked it for 100 years. The people of Indochina are entitled to something better than that."

In this unexceptionably idealistic statement can we not see the seeds of America's future tragic involvement in the region?

But, granting this, France still considered Vietnam little more than a source of raw materials—the orthodox view of colonial economics. Later, a certain amount of light industry was introduced, however. France's economic blunders in Vietnam were as nothing compared with her political blunders.

Colonial government generally is patterned after the home government, and the instability in French politics was reflected in the rise and fall of governments in Indochina. During the 43 years of French civil administration, there were 23 different governors or acting governors ruling the area.

With so rapid a turnover of governors, no consistent colonial policy could be developed. In 1902 the colony was split into three areas and two protectorates with the cities originally ceded to the French remaining as separate colonies.

Vietnamese emperors continued to exist, but had no real power. In the lower echelons, Vietnamese retained their posts, but were paid half or a third as much as Frenchmen holding the same positions. Later this was liberalized, but only after severe opposition in France.

But the main problem was the lack of any representative bodies. Although assemblies existed in the territories, their legislative powers were limited to expressing "opinions" on economic and social legislation. Finally, in 1928, an Indochina-wide legislature came into existence, called the Grand Council of Financial and Economic Interests. It was designed to represent the views of the people to the governor general. Of 51 members, 23 were native (18 Vietnamese, 5 Loa and Cambodian).

But the preponderance of non-native representatives and the influence of the rubber companies ensured the assembly's functioning merely as a rubber stamp.

Increasingly, the inequalities so blatantly present in the colonial social and judicial system angered the young intellectuals. Naturally they tended to propose more and more radical solutions for their country's woe.

It was the Second World War that gave dissident elements their chance. France lost her hold on the nation, and the United States found itself stepping into France's uncomfortable shoes.

To explain the post-war situation of the two states it is necessary to understand the two men who were to play dominant roles.

