

YOUR SIMPLE WAR

part 1 by: Howard Moffett

(Editor's note: Howard Moffett is a full-time correspondent in South Vietnam for Collegiate Press Service, an agency of the United States Student Press Association. An American citizen, Moffett has lived in China, Japan, and Korea, where his father is superintendent of a Presbyterian hospital. He was 1956-66 editor of the Yale Daily News. This is the first of a series of introductory articles written by Moffett in Saigon. He describes the social context in which the war in Vietnam is being fought.) Special to Canadian University Press.

It is based on three assumptions: (1) What is happening here is as important as what should be happening here; (2) What is happening may in the course of time affect what should happen, i.e., the use of power and the objective conditions to which it gives rise may either undermine or create a moral prerogative: morality, like power, is not static, and must sometimes be measured in relative terms; (3) Neither what is happening here, nor what should be happening here, are very adequately understood by most Americans.

societies, co-existing within the same geographical boundaries. Each is trying to organize, strengthen and sanction itself while weakening or destroying the other. Though each group numbers millions, they are both led by relatively small elites which have developed their own traditions, their own social values, and their own vested interests. The majority in each group are people who, through varying degrees of sophistication, are influenced by the traditions and values of their elite but have little stake in its vested interests.

economic stability; or soldiers, interested in winning without getting killed, recognition for bravery and home leave; or farmers, interested in the weather, the market for pigs, owning their own land and being left alone. These people have been at war for over 20 years, almost all of them are interested in staying alive.

This is not to say that the majority in each group do not participate in the culture of their elites -- they do, and often by choice. But it seems likely that in a showdown many in either group would be willing to dissociate themselves from their own elite and exchange its culture for that of the other, so long as their own popular and private interests were not seriously threatened.

SAIGON (CPS)--Last year at this time I was writing editorials calling the American war in Vietnam unjust, illegal and anti-democratic.

I could still make a case for the last two (it has occurred to me since that a just war is a contradiction in terms.) But after a month in Vietnam, I am clear on one thing: nothing here is that simple, nothing is that black-and-white.

Those who talk about Vietnam in these terms, and on the other hand those who mouth clichés about defending democracy and freedom against Communist aggression, have reduced one of the most complicated and agonizing situations in modern history to shibboleths. Worse, they have succeeded in making these shibboleths virtually the only terms of the public debate on Vietnam.

The following analysis is quasi-sociological. It may strike some as an intellectual game; I see it rather as an attempt to step back a bit and establish a frame of reference against which further analysis and interpretation may be measured. It may also suggest some of the hazards involved in basing value judgments either on deadline press reports or on personal political preferences.

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part 2

Both sides in the Viet Nam war are using all the available power they can muster to gain support of the population. Yet there is another dimension to the conflict between the elites of the government and the Viet Cong, and it is best expressed in terms of their values.

One side claims a sincere anti-colonialism refined by fire through twenty-one years of war. It emphasizes social justice and especially the abolition of privilege. It travels closer to the ground, and more often has succeeded in identifying itself with the simple virtues and viewpoints of the peasantry.

Furthermore, it has often succeeded in identifying all civil authority, which the peasant tends to view as arbitrary and inimical to his interests, with the other elite (both sides try to do this). It stresses the necessity for social struggle and to wage this struggle it has built up a system of authority which is unified to the point of regimentation.

Discipline is strict, and apparently little deviation from the official point of view is tolerated lest the infrastructure's effectiveness be weakened. Personal freedom and ambition seem to be subordinated (sometimes voluntarily, sometimes not) to the collective goal.

The other elite claims nationalism, but has become increasingly reliant on foreign arms and aid

to achieve it. It too speaks of social justice and the abolition of privilege, but it lays greater stress on the protection of personal freedoms, fortunes and points of view. As a result, differences often become outright dissension.

This elite is anything but unified. It is riddled with factions competing for influence across political, regional and institutional lines. It has maintained a significant degree of personal and civil liberty at the expense of the continuation of privilege and even organized corruption.

Yet this elite, heavily dependent on foreign aid because of its own factionalism and widespread corruption, is unified in opposing the regimentation and loss of personal liberty imposed by the other elite in the areas it controls.

What is perhaps difficult for American intellectuals to understand is that, though they are often abused by those in power at any given time, the convictions of the second elite run as deep and sincere as those of the first. The issue is better expressed by a leading Vietnamese intellectual, Ton That Thien, in a recent article in the Asia Magazine:

"One may ask why the Vietnamese fight, and what has sustained them for so long. The answer can be summed up in two words: liberation and freedom. Those are the aims for which

They are people like civil servants, interested in salaries and a modicum of culture, personal freedom and opportunity for advancement; or merchants, interested in the free flow of trade and

In other words, the ideological and material interests of the two elites are not quite so important to their respective sub-groups, except where expert and intense propaganda has taken effect over long periods of time (as it has in some areas on both sides). This means that fundamentally at issue within South Vietnam are the traditions, social values and vested interests of two opposing elites, fighting to destroy each other's control over substantial portions of the population.

Will buttons end the war?

In such a situation, the distinction between being supported by, and exercising control over, different elements of the population is at best a hazy one. The question is illustrated by the importance that both sides attach to the concept of 'infrastructure' or its equivalent in Vietnamese: 'ha tang co so'. Broadly speaking an infrastructure is any system of organized authority. Implicit in the concept is the idea that an infrastructure -- whether at the hamlet or national level -- cannot exercise control over people without having their support in substantial degree. Conversely, if control can be established, support may be developed over time through popular administration.

The personnel of their respective infrastructures are the primary weapons in the power struggle going on here at every level between the government and the Viet Cong. Major elements of each infrastructure are devoted to strengthening it and weakening the opposing infrastructure (e.g., both sides lay great stress on the development of strong recruiting and propaganda teams, both practice selective assassination to destroy key lines in the enemy's infrastructure). Furthermore, each infrastructure is said to be heavily infiltrated by agents of the opposing one. Significantly but not surprisingly, many Vietnamese believe that both Viet Cong and government village infrastructures are now much weaker than the traditional village power structure prior to the coming of colonialism or communism.

To gain its political -- and cultural -- ends, the elite infrastructure on each side has mobilized substantial portions of the population it controls. Each has developed weapons -- technological and logistical superiority within the contested area, whereas the other appears to enjoy the psychological advantage. This is a struggle for power, and no holds are barred. The skill in highest demand is that of employing the appropriate weapon at the right time, whether it be a mortar or a lie.

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