

SAIGON: THE CITY TODAY

by HOWARD MOFFAT

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Saigon is probably the world's most relaxed centre of intrigue, violence and war. It doesn't seem like a city under siege.

Sloe-eyed, will-o'-the-wisp girls dressed in soft slit aodai's and spiked heels walk narrow boulevards overhung with green elms or tropical palms. In the market old men squat on the curb over a game of Chinese chess. Their women are nearby, chewing betel nut, grinning and spitting the juice through red-stained teeth.

At the Cercle Sportif Vietnamese and European girls lounge in bikinis beside the pool, while wealthy white-clad warriors shoot tennis balls at each other on beautifully groomed courts.

In low-slung French colonial office buildings, civil servants who have kept papers moving for nine governments in three years go on stamping and filing, conversing in French on difficult bureaucratic questions, and drinking tea.

The university opens a month late, and even then no one seems to know the exact date until one day classes break out.

Young women and middle-aged men wear silk or cotton pajamas much of the day. It does save time, because from 12 to 3 in the afternoon the city shuts down and people sleep.

Newcomers are often baffled by the casual air that hangs over much of Saigon. 'I thought there

was a war going on here,' one five-day veteran said recently.

Saigon is hot and muggy. It is also a place where war is no longer an emergency condition but the normal state of things. A certain percentage of the population has been engaged in killing as a profession for many years, and the tendency has been to turn it into a nine-to-five job. A nine-to-five job loses its excitement after a while.

Though it doesn't move very fast, Saigon is one of the world's busiest and most crowded urban areas. There are two and a half million people living here now, one-sixth of the population of South Vietnam. The city was built for about half that number; it has doubled in the last five years.

Saigon wakes early. Curfew ends at 4 a.m. and the ten great markets of the capital open for business. A stream of peasants brings chickens, pigs, rice, vegetables and fruit into town. By noon all the food has been bought, the central market is deserted, and rats the size of kittens scuttle along the cement gutters gnawing on vegetable husks and other refuse.

By seven in the morning main arteries are choked with battered little blue-and-yellow Renault taxis, pedi-cabs, motorpedicabs, bicycles, three-wheeled motor buses, motor scooters, jeeps, trucks, American sedans, horse-drawn carts, motorcycles and swarms of pedestrians.

The stalls of the 'common man's PX' have been set up downtown. Army ponchos are spread on sidewalks and vendors hawk everything from French toothpaste to American whiskey and C-rations. Mothers nurse their babies as they sit cross-legged in the sun, teen-agers hold out sunglasses or cigarette lighters, tiny little girls grab your hand and stuff a bag of peanuts into it, and everybody asks, 'You buy? Cheap, cheap.'

Everywhere people are building --hotels, apartments, offices, private homes. Saigon's first department store is going up on Tu Do Street. Off a back alley near a sewer-canal, truckloads of rubble fill in a plot of swamp. And two weeks later, workers are finishing the second storey of a new house. Bricks are thrown up one by one to a middle man who stacks them while a third lays them in with cheap mortar.

In the harbor, port congestion ties up tons of imports for months while a few hundred years away prices soar as speculators hoard the goods that do get through, legally or not.

American GI's in olive drab fatigues hang from telephone poles trying to bolster the city's sagging and overworked telephone systems.

Saigon is a jaded city. There are no innocents here, not even little kids. Everything happens in the streets, and a ten-year-old Viet-

namese girl is likely to know more about the way adults behave in the dark or under stress than a 20-year-old American college boy.

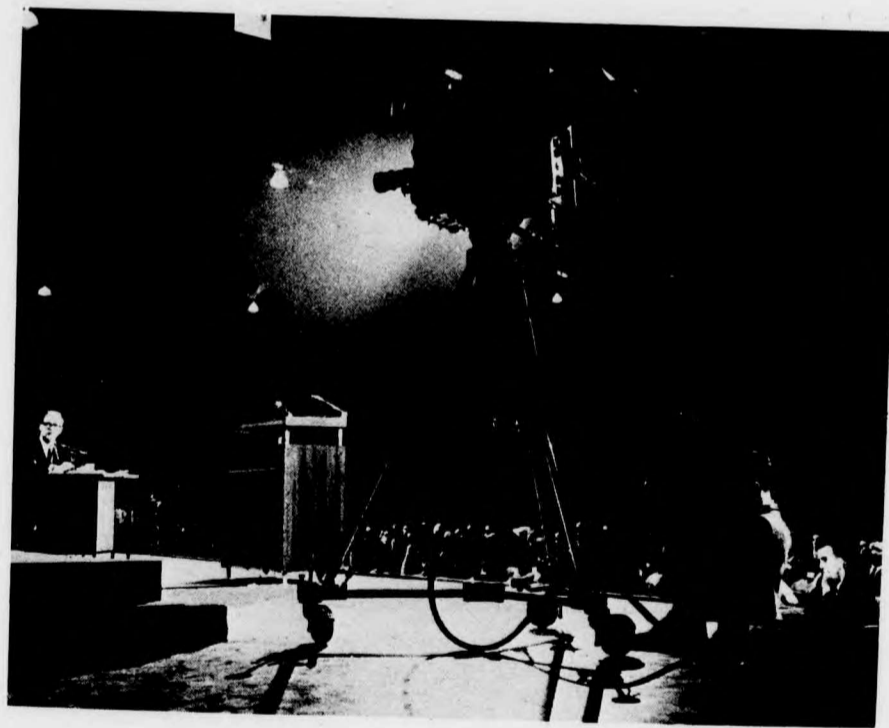
Layers of dust give busy streets the same dull yellow look as the stucco walls around French villas and office buildings.

For lack of private toilet facilities, many urinate or defecate in alleys and streets. A year ago piles of garbage lay rotting on Saigon's main boulevards, and even now in some places the trucks can't cart it away fast enough.

On Tu Do (Freedom) Street, once a fashionable office and shopping district, scores of bars now cater to American GI's. The dull, inevitable pump of Nancy Sinatra or the Beatles lasts from three in the afternoon to eleven at night, when military police move through to hustle lingerers home before curfew.

Inside, a young air cavalryman down from An Khe tells a sad-looking girl the same war story he told another girl last night, and wishes he were telling it to the girl back home. For her part, the bar girl tells him in broken English about her divided family --maybe the same story she told last night, maybe not--and wonders if he will take her home. She made more money last week than her father did last year. Prices are higher now though.

FOCUS ON... ...VIETNAM



Outside, teen-age boys peddle pornography and young men with motor scooters and old men with pedicabs offer a ride home, and a 'nice young girl--cheap'.

Students dodging the draft buy forged credentials, and money changers--who often turn out to be sleight-of-hand artists or secret police agents--promise double the official rate for greenbacks.

The refugees and the poor live in their alleys on the perimeter of the middle-class city. These thoroughfares, some of them all of three feet wide, wind in interminable mazes wherever there is

ground to build a house.

Despite the weariness, the closeness and the heat, Saigon's culture has a spontaneity that twenty years of war has not stamped out.

Delta hospitality is famous throughout Southeast Asia; any guest is given the best in the house.

Night life is tinny, but those who frequent the city's clubs give it a pulsing rhythm of its own. Any soldier lives close to the surface, and the Vietnamese infantryman tends to be more fatalistic than most. A

terrorist grenade or a drunken officer's pistol shot could end it any time. Private dance parties require a permit, but many young hosts and hostesses take their chances and often wind up with the police as uninvited guests.

French influence is still evident everywhere. Those city boys who have managed to avoid the draft often affect French styles in dress, haircuts, and speech.

Well-stocked French bookstores bear testimony to a large class of people who continue to enjoy European literature for its own sake. At this moment,

controversy rages over whether to permit the French to maintain their prestigious lycees, and whether or not to substitute Vietnamese--or English--for French as the language of instruction in the universities.

The performing arts have been hit hard by the war, but every week or so a concert or recital is announced, and Vietnamese plays draw large audiences.

Buddhist activity has waned considerably since Prime Minister Ky's successful crackdown on the Struggle Movement in Hue last spring. Still, the pagodas are filled with saffron-

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