

# Emergence of a Nation

The author, a Fulbright scholar and brilliant O.U. graduate, gives account of Viet Nam's growing pains from post at Saigon. He's aide-de-camp to the deputy chief, American Military Assistance Advisory Group to Indo-China.

By BILL SPOHRER, '53ba

WHEN I FIRST ARRIVED in Saigon the middle of last March, the city was a package of dynamite, wrapped in miles of barbed wire and prickly with the barrels of fifty thousand rifles.

The open war with the Viet Minh was over—ended, at least temporarily, with the signing of the Geneva Accords. "La guerre morte" the French had called it—"the dead war," because it had never lived in the heart of the French nation as a cause for which to fight.

The Geneva agreement had split Viet Nam at the 17th parallel, leaving the Communists in control of rich Tonkin and the northern half of Annam.

In Free Viet Nam, an inexperienced government, newly emerged from colonial rule and struggling with the apparently insurmountable problems of governmental organization, national defense, and the thousands of homeless refugees from the north, attempted to bring order out of chaos.

But Viet Nam's Catholic Premier Ngo Dinh Diem saw the very existence of his new nation threatened by powerful private armies with interests of their own. Three political-religious sects, the Cao Dai, the Hoa Hao, and Binh Xuyen, were demanding a national government more favorable to their interests, and were threatening to use armed force to back up their demands.

And from north of the 17th parallel, the

Viet Minh watched as the South Viet Nameese bickered among themselves. It must have appeared certain to the communists that Diem's government would soon topple, and that the rivalry of the armed sects would leave the country ripe for an easy conquest.

The Cao Dai, a mystic mixture of the world's principal religious philosophies, with a hierarchy of saints which includes Victor Hugo and ex-president of China Sun-yat Sen, posed a threat with its large, experienced army. From the Cao Dai "Vatican" at the little town of Tay Ninh, the sect's Pope commanded a large following.

The Hoa Hao, another religious sect, controlled a large area south of Saigon in which it collected its own taxes and enforced its own laws. Its army included an auxiliary of black-robed women warriors.

But the most immediate threat was from the Binh Xuyen, a heavily-armed collection of thugs and ex-river pirates who maintained their version of law and order in the Saigon-Cholon area in return for the vast rake-off from the city's vice concessions.

Leader of the Binh Xuyen (the name means "Toward Peace") was General Le Van Vien, called Bay-Vien, a fantastic adventurer who, with his lust for power, army of mercenaries, and his vast retinue of aides, mistresses, and hangers-on, closely resembled descriptions of the feudal lords of the

Italian Renaissance. Known for his ferociousness toward men and his kindness toward animals, he kept a tank of crocodiles as pets in his command post.

Through astute political maneuvering, and out-and-out gangsterism, Bay-Vien had become one of the wealthiest, most powerful men in Indo-China. In all, he commanded 5,000 well-equipped, experienced troops—the police of Saigon-Cholon. His financial interests included some of the most lucrative gambling halls and night clubs.

The sects had gained their power and prestige during the struggle against the Viet Minh when the French, turning to any organized group which could muster an effective fighting force, had subsidized them. Later, with the subsidies gone, the sects had to find their own means of existence. And now, for the Binh Xuyen in particular, this existence was being threatened. Diem, in consolidating the power of the national government, could not tolerate that the police of the capital continued to exist as a separate, private enterprise, more devoted to lining its own pockets than to serving the city.

The situation that existed in Saigon in March was making the government and the national army appear ridiculous. Scattered throughout the city were strong points and posts held by the Binh Xuyen—



No generation of Viet-Nameese were spared the growing pains of a nation.



During the battle for Saigon, in which factional armies tried unsuccessfully to take control, the night was lighted by the battle fury of the civil war.

a force openly hostile to the government in power. At some points, troops of the national army looked directly across the street from their outposts to where green-bereted Binh Xuyen stood formation or stared back insolently from behind the barrels of machineguns.

In this explosive atmosphere the French under Commissioner General Paul Ely and the Americans under Ambassador J. Lawton Collin, counseled caution. It would take only a spark to ignite the powder and bring on a full-scale civil war—and an open invitation to the Communists.

Then one midnight late in March came the spark. Fighting broke out between troops of the Binh Xuyen and a Nationalist army detachment holding a police station on broad, tree-lined Boulevard Gallieni.

From my apartment ten blocks away could be heard the sound of gun fire and the dull explosion of grenades and mortar shells. The night sky was laced with red dashes of tracer bullets, and the streets were full of civilians in panic—running in every direction in an attempt to escape the fighting. The battle grew in intensity, and

Continued page 26



During and after the battle, wounded refugees are given first aid treatment in a waiting ambulance. Note the bandages on the victims' knee wounds.

## Where Is the Rah? . . .

Continued from page 4

City through Moore to Norman on the old Oklahoma Railway Co. interurban? They used to rock it, remember, and get the guy-wire trolley off-current to devil the combination motorman-chaperon enthroned on his wicker seat up front. It used to cost 45 cents to ride the conveyance, or was it 45 minutes to "the City"? They commute a four-lane highway nowadays and can almost catch a first run movie in Oklahoma City between afternoon labs.

Whatever became of Blue Pencil, the English club which allegedly limited its

membership only to those enrolled in the University who could write their name? A cartoon in an old Sooner yearbook limned the club about 30 years ago with a drawing of a pledge line that reached from campus to outlying Norman. And when, since 1923, has there been a furor on campus to equal the date boycott propelled by *Oklahoma Daily* editor Mike Monroney?

You'd be surprised, alums, how few students now on campus ever heard of the *Whirlwind* humor magazine. Lev Edwards and Lynn Riggs and Buff Burtis and Hal Crouch made it whirl for sure, you will recollect. The late and reasonably unlamented *Covered Wagon* was its modern

counterpart, but got put in the deep freeze about four years ago for financial woes and being overzealous with word and cartoon.

Speaking of the old days, it pegs you a has-been, I reckon, to remember we had a whale of a time staging the annual Sooner Burlesque show. Today's neon lit, smooth variety show, Sooner Scandals, bears singularly little resemblance to the old skit which roasted the pants off the faculty. One girl student almost got suspended for her raw imitation of the dean of women, caricatured in plowhand boots.

We started out to say they are more serious students now than we were. But we doubt they have half the fun. It is not solely that so many are veterans or will be shortly.

We saw a young man student the other morning in the Union cafeteria. He had his two preschool children along for breakfast while his wife made her 8 o'clock. He met her at 9, swapped off the kids, and ran to his own first class.

If you're measuring student school spirit these days, you may have to count the cheers minus the above young father who doesn't make it to the stadium because his wife has a Saturday job and he babysits while he works on lab papers.

One thing for sure, the college student today, while facing an altered and tensely geared world, has considerably less uneasiness about landing a job after his degree than his father had. Nobody in the '20's published page ads in national magazines about the crying need for engineers. There weren't any teams of industrial interviewers with heavy on-campus schedules of interviews for prospective graduates. Tell a fresh graduate today that \$25 a week was a respectable starting salary for an inexperienced, though college trained, hand about 30 years back, and he won't laugh, but he may think you are kidding.

Come to think of it, why not assume that, conceivably, one of the peripheral reasons the current college man or woman is of such fine stripe, by and large, is that he or she had some pretty fair folks at home who steered him around some of the foibles and fallacies they lived through when they were young.

## Emergence of a Nation . . .

Continued from page 12

within an hour, a battalion of red bereted paratroopers, the government's crack troops, appeared on the scene as reinforcements. Firing continued until about five the next morning, when dawn revealed a victory for the government forces; the first victory of an untried army.

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An uneasy truce followed and American and French advisors tried desperately to prevent an all-out war. Troops of the French Foreign Legion, blond, blue-eyed Germans for the most part, forged a ring of steel around the European quarter with tanks and armored cars, determined that the opposing forces would not carry their battles to the European population. Thousands of terrified Viet Nameese, their scorn of "Colonialists" forgotten for the moment, spread their straw mats behind the protection of the guns of the French forces.

The truce, punctured by numerous incidents, dragged on into April. Finally Diem, his patience at an end, fired the Binh Xuyen police chief, gave his forces forty-eight hours to come over to the Nationalist side.

The answer came one night shortly afterward with the crashing explosion of mortar shells on the grounds of the peach-colored "Palace of Independence" where Diem sat talking with his advisors. The Binh Xuyen had replied to his ultimatum with guns.

The Premier wasted no time. With a quick telephone call to General Ely, he informed the French that he intended to fight the rebels to the end. Then he ordered government troops into action. Paratroopers, armed with sub machineguns, quickly overran Binh Xuyen outposts and pushed down broad Boulevard Gallieni which runs between Saigon and Cholon. Here most of the fighting took place.

Tanks and armored cars poured a deadly fire into rebel strongholds, and fire, started by explosions, swept nearly two square miles of flimsy straw and bamboo structures. Reduced to the defensive, the Binh Xuyen were knocked reeling from their first positions and could hold only temporarily to several isolated outposts. Fighting raged around the big concrete "Y" bridge over which the Binh Xuyen forces were withdrawing from the city. Machinegun fire echoed through the deserted card rooms of the "Grand Monde," world famous gambling house that for several years had furnished a large part of the finances for General Bay-Vien's forces.

Within forty-eight hours after this phase of the fighting had begun, Diem claimed a victory for the national government. The cost was heavy. Hospitals were flooded with injured. There were an estimated 2,000 casualties including 500 killed, and about 100,000 were left homeless.

But the rebel forces were driven out of the city and armed troops who policed Saigon now took their orders from only one source—the national government of Free Viet Nam.

It was out of the chaos of the war in Sai-

gon that a substantial government of Free Viet Nam emerged. The immediate threat of a coup d'etat by the sects was ended. And the people saw for the first time that their government was government of men and not of paper—a government that could back its words with deeds. And the government itself gained much needed confidence in its own ability to act.

South Viet Nam, a nation of only ten and a half million people, is vitally important in the free world's struggle against Communist expansion. This is not only because of South Viet Nam's value in itself, i.e., as the "Rice Bowl" of Southeast Asia, but because through it, and its neighbor states of

Laos and Cambodia, lies the gateway to all of Southeast Asia.

The free world has decided that Communist aggression must stop here, and to back up this belief, the government of the United States is investing in Free Viet Nam nearly \$400 million a year in aid, assistance and technical advice.

From the battle of Saigon, a new nation which had been divided against itself, emerged stronger and more confident. But the real, never-ending battle in Indo-China, the battle between the Democratic world and the Communist world, has only begun. Free Viet Nam is determined that it shall not lose.

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