

There is an important Christian component to the Sandinista revolution. The Christian component in the Sandinista revolution consists of little more than the Sandinistas' willingness to accept the support of those Christians, many of them non-Nicaraguans, who are willing to subordinate religion to the Communist political program of the Sandinistas.

A glimpse of Sandinista attitudes is afforded by a secret document excerpted by Christian (alas without giving her source) in which the FSLN leadership explained to Sandinista cadres its decision during its first December in office not to try to eradicate Christmas. "To confront a tradition of more than 1,979 years in a direct manner, in these moments, less than five months after the triumph, would carry us into political conflicts and we would lose influence among our people," it said. Nonetheless, according to the document, Sandinista policy on Christmas did not aim "to

reinforce a tradition, particularly a religious one," but rather "to transform it" by attempting to give it "a different, fundamentally political, content."

Revolutionary Nicaragua has become a magnet for a highly politicized kind of international ecumenical activism. Whether this serves God's will is for Him to say. But obviously it serves the regime's. Thus while the Catholic hierarchy has been a center of resistance to Sandinista rule, a pro-Sandinista "People's Church" has been promoted by the regime. Its unofficial headquarters, the "Valdivieso Center," is underwritten, Christian discovered, by the primarily Protestant and ideologically left World Council of Churches.

Something of the nature of the World Council and the reasons why the Sandinistas welcome its brand of ecumenism is illustrated by an anecdote Christian tells about Nicaragua's Permanent Commission on Human Rights, the highly respected indepen-

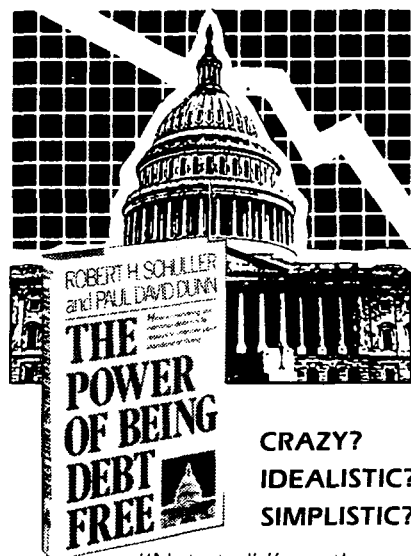
dent body that fought against human rights violations under Somoza and later under the Sandinistas:

In April 1979, before the fall of Somoza, Gonzalez [then head of the Permanent Commission] had gone to Geneva to the headquarters of the World Council of Churches and been received "with smiles and abrazos" by the Reverend Charles R. Harper, Jr., head of the Human Rights Resources Offices on Latin America. Gonzalez left with \$15,000 in assistance, part of what he understood to be a commitment for \$43,000. In May 1980, after ten months of Sandinista rule, Gonzalez went back to Geneva and was told that there would be no further payment to the Permanent Commission. The reason he was given, Gonzalez said, was that human rights was now guaranteed by the government in Nicaragua. Reverend Harper confirmed to me several years later that the member churches had decided there was no compelling reason to continue support for the Permanent Commission after the fall of

Somoza, but said there had never been a formal pledge for additional financial aid.

Shirley Christian's book may not be the last word on recent Nicaraguan history—no contemporaneous study ever is—but it will serve splendidly to make the crucial outlines of that history readily accessible to all North Americans who are interested in it. There is simply no longer any excuse for the kind of voluble ignorance typified by Tip. As for U.S. policy toward Nicaragua there is, as in all situations, room for people of good will to disagree. But with the publication of this book, there is much less room to disagree about the nature of the Sandinista movement or the direction in which it is determined to take Nicaragua. □

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A VIETCONG MEMOIR: AN INSIDE ACCOUNT OF THE VIETNAM WAR AND ITS AFTERMATH

Truong Nhu Tang, with David Chanoff and Doan Van Toai/
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich/\$17.95

Henrik Bering-Jensen

On September 1, 1978, a leaky old river boat full of near-starving Vietnamese refugees reached an oil exploration station off the coast of Malaysia. After intense deliberations, the refugees were given permission to climb aboard to await further passage to the U.N. refugee camp on Galang Island. Among the passengers was Truong Nhu Tang, one of the founders of the National Liberation Front and a minister of justice in the Provisional Revolutionary Government, the highest ranking Vietcong official yet to flee his country. Now living in Paris, Mr. Tang has written his memoirs; in them he concentrates on the political side of the conflict and in the process reveals major power struggles within the Vietcong, tensions the West has known very little about. Essentially his is the tale of a revolution betrayed, of how the South helped bring about its own destruction.

Tang's story begins amidst the general break-up of the old empires after the Second World War. Though a member of the privileged bourgeoisie and a product of French education, Tang experienced the first stirrings of nationalist sentiment in the anti-French riots in Saigon in August 1945. The following year he was sent to study in

Paris, where he was introduced to Ho Chi Minh, who was in town to negotiate with the French (unsuccessfully, as it turned out). Tang was completely won over by Ho's vision of a unified Vietnam devoid of foreign influence. Tang changed his studies from pharmacy to politics and stayed on in Paris to arouse public resistance to France's colonial policies.

When Tang returned permanently to Saigon in 1955 after an added stint at the French School of Naval Supply in Toulon, it was to an independent but divided Vietnam, with Ho ruling the North and the playboy king Bao Dai and his prime minister Ngo Dinh Diem (who soon ousted Dai) controlling the South. Earlier that year America had begun to take over where France had left off, funneling aid directly to Saigon and agreeing to train the South Vietnamese army. To Tang the growing American involvement meant the increased likelihood of a permanent division of his country, as part of the larger East-West confrontation. His hatred of the French was therefore transferred to the Americans and their puppet Diem (as the vernacular of the period had it).

According to Tang, the fierce nationalism that gripped him at the time was more a xenophobic patriotism than a coherent set of political beliefs. He declared himself willing to accept the help of almost any regime to rid the

Henrik Bering-Jensen is a Danish writer who currently lives in the United States.

country of strangers. In so doing, he made the crucial mistake of believing that the Leninism Ho subscribed to was likewise a matter of convenience rather than conviction. Consequently he paid little attention to the 900,000 people who had come south after the Geneva Accords with their grim testimony about people's justice and forced collectivization. Most were Catholics, after all, and could be expected to disagree with Ho's regime.

These years, then, saw the beginnings of the organized underground resistance that in time was to turn into the National Liberation Front, the political arm of the insurgents. And in Diem the Vietcong had the ideal opponent; proud and self-willed, he ignored American advice that he come to terms with his non-Communist opponents. Diem's ability to alienate whole segments of the population was indeed extraordinary: the Buddhists, the middle classes, the peasants. But of course other factors played a part too. For instance, it did not help Diem's position when the head of his crucial Strategic Hamlet Program turned out to be a Vietcong spy and Tang's friend.

The NLF was formally set up in 1960. Its stated goal was a pluralistic national government, neutral and non-aligned, and it envisioned a peaceful reunification process that respected the right of national minorities to autonomy. Otherwise the emphasis was on civil rights, land reform, and social welfare. The plan was clearly devised to have the broadest possible appeal, Tang ascribing the fancy artwork to Ho Chi Minh himself. Symbolically the idea was expressed in the NLF flag with its blue and red halves and the yellow star in the middle, signifying the two halves of the nation unified in their common aim. At this point, Tang saw no reason to worry overmuch about the political differences between the parties involved. Their success depended on their ability to work together, and the traditional Vietnamese emphasis on personal ties and family was thought to offer sufficient guarantee against betrayal.

By the fall of 1963, Diem's stubbornness had assumed such proportions that the situation was no longer tolerable. The United States gave its reluctant assent to a coup to remove Diem. But Diem's death only made things worse, as one military government replaced another with tiresome regularity—"this coup shit," as an exasperated Lyndon Johnson so aptly called it. Sixteen months later, South Vietnam's internal chaos had reached a stage where only direct American in-

tervention could save the country. On March 8, 1965 U.S. Marines waded ashore at Danang. Tang sees the NLF's inability to discourage the U.S. from stepping in as its greatest failure in the sixties.

Against overwhelming U.S. military superiority, the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese developed their own three-pronged response, carefully integrating their military, political, and diplomatic moves. Fighting and talking, talking and fighting, as the strategy was known. As Tang points out, this approach allowed them to see battles as psychological events and later to use negotiations to improve their military position. It is of course interesting to compare this approach with that of the Americans, whose military and diplomatic efforts tend to be treated as separate and unrelated.

The Vietcong strategy bore its first fruit after the 1968 Tet offensive, when a military catastrophe was turned into a political and strategic victory. But the NLF had been devastated in the South during Tet, and was now too openly controlled by the North. A strong effort was necessary to re-establish the autonomous and broad-based image of the southern movement and to allay the widespread fears that a Vietcong victory might turn into a blood bath. (The massacres in Hue gave good reason for concern.) Furthermore, the NLF needed to counter the new Nixon Vietnamization policy. The so-called Alliance of National, Democratic, and Peace Forces had already been established in 1968, stressing the importance of a slow and deliberate reunification that would respect the economic, social, and cultural differences between North and South. In 1969 the Provisional Revolutionary Government, in which Tang was named minister of justice, was launched with great fanfare. Still the motto was "more friends, fewer foes." And had not Pham Van Dong, the North Vietnamese prime minister, repeatedly assured the world that "no one has this stupid and criminal idea of annexing the South"?

Despite these carefully constructed facades, strains were developing between the southern revolutionaries and their northern cousins, strains which grew steadily in the early 1970s as the emphasis shifted from the political and psychological arena to the battlefield. Increasingly, the southerners were treated as second-class revolutionaries, their functions taken over by North Vietnamese cadres. Tang cites occasions when Saigon's intellectual elite had to sit through long seminars on the true relationship between patriotism and Communism, brutal and demeaning sessions employing all the classic Communist interrogation techniques.

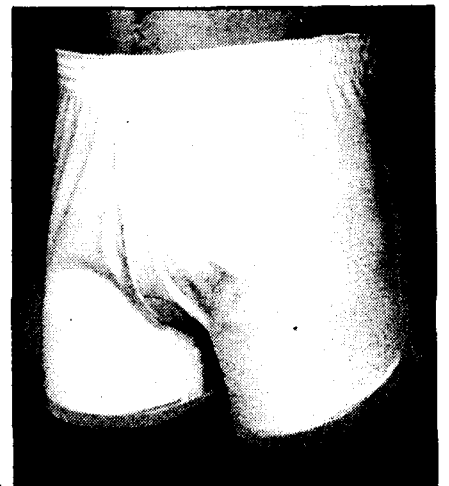
Tang's revelations therefore throw an interesting light on North Vietnam's eventual "concessions" in the Paris negotiations. It was considered a major victory, for instance, when chief negotiator Le Duc Tho dropped his demands for Thieu's ouster and for the formation of an immediate coalition government, two points the North Vietnamese had so far declared un-negotiable. But as Tang remarks, though this would have gotten rid of the Thieu regime in one stroke, it would also have entailed sharing power with the southern nationalists. The prospect of seeing their monopoly on nationalism broken in the last minute understandably did not appeal to the Communists. Furthermore, Hanoi's two main objectives had already been assured: the withdrawal of American forces and the permanent presence of the North Vietnamese army on South Vietnamese soil.

Consequently, when after the fall of Saigon the Provisional Revolutionary Government assumed power in the South, it was not as an internationally recognized government, but a government "riding on the back of the North Vietnamese army's tiger, precarious and tentative guests in their own house." It had become an encumbrance that had to be dealt with once and for all—or as it was put in Party parlance, "a new phase had been entered."

A foretaste of what this meant was given at the victory parade in Saigon

two weeks after the city's "liberation": endless rows of North Vietnamese regulars passing the reviewing stand in their brand new uniforms, followed by a few sickly companies of tattered Vietcong guerrillas under a red flag with a single yellow star, the flag of North Vietnam. "The army has already been unified," Tang was informed by the North Vietnamese general standing next to him. —

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In the policy discussions that followed, the southerners were simply pushed aside. When one of Tang's colleagues sarcastically suggested a funeral celebration for the movement, the North Vietnamese politely obliged. Tang's description of the scenes in Rex Dance Hall, the site of the southern revolution's final humiliation, are especially poignant: In this notorious den of sin the southern conspirators held their final gathering, knowing full well that the game was over. Everything they had fought for was lost; their policies of concord and reconciliation, which had sold so well abroad, were abandoned. Arbitrary arrests and confiscations were the order of the day, and the one-month "re-education" program for former government supporters was prolonged indefinitely. (One of Tang's brothers remains imprisoned to this day.) According to Tang, it was as if the country had been invaded by a swarm of hungry locusts, devouring everything in sight. No

wonder Tang and his associates were looked upon as traitors for having let them in.

As to foreign policy, the new Vietnam sided with the Soviets in the Sino-Soviet dispute and immediately embarked on an aggressive course against its neighbors. So much for the notions of neutrality and non-alignment of the original declarations.

Despite his refusal to serve in the new unified government and despite his seeming candor, it is hard to feel any great sympathy for Tang himself. From the book he emerges as a representative of an overweening community of Saigon intellectuals who believed they could use the support of the Communists in the North to further their own cause. Instead they ended up being used themselves, and thereby brought great harm upon their country. As the book progresses it becomes increasingly hard to reconcile Tang's cool and dispassionate exposition of revolutionary strategy with his pro-

fessed naiveté about ultimate Communist intentions.

Nevertheless, the book is extremely important because it confirms so many of the predictions of successive American administrations, who at the time were widely accused of misleading

the public. Time and again the book bears out the validity of those warnings. Unfortunately it is ten years too late for Vietnam, and those who need most to learn its lessons are now busy propagating some of the same illusions about Central America. □

HOW TO MAKE NUCLEAR WEAPONS OBSOLETE

Robert Jastrow/Little, Brown/\$15.95

Karl O'Lessker

A striking feature of the great Star Wars debate is the difference in tone between supporters and opponents of the plan in the national security community. While proponents such as Daniel Graham, Colin Gray, and Robert Jastrow almost always present their case coolly and analytically, critics such as George Ball, Carl Sagan, and the legions of op-ed strategists seem unable to resist the use of sarcasm, invective, and intimations of apocalypse. Consider, for example, former undersecretary of state Ball's lengthy assault on Star Wars earlier this year in the *New York Review of Books*, where in the very first paragraph he characterized President Reagan's announcement of the Strategic Defense Initiative as "one of the most irresponsible acts by any head of state in modern times" before treating us to such slashing aperçus as "the President announced his decision with breathless awe," "the President's proposal did not seem bizarre to a public used to science fiction and conditioned by long exposure to Buck Rogers, *Star Trek*, and Darth Vader," "all this blathering," "all this mindless hustle and bustle," and much, much more.

It is also worth noting that while supporters of SDI make it a point to raise and to attempt to refute the arguments against their own position, opponents do so only rarely. (An honorable exception is an article in the July *Atlantic* by Robert McNamara and Hans Bethe.) Instead they continually, almost obsessively, restate their major contentions, oblivious to the factual and logical points that have been raised against them. They are perhaps at their most blatant on the issue of ballistic missile defense in-

fallibility. Time and again they declare as if conclusively that no defense against Soviet ballistic missiles can be 100-percent perfect and thus no such defense is worth striving for. In other words, they refuse to address the perfectly straightforward, insistently repeated argument that, for one thing, no one has ever claimed a BMD could be made leakproof, and moreover, that in order to accomplish precisely what its proponents want it to, *it doesn't have to be*.

These reflections are prompted by the important new book by Robert Jastrow, *How To Make Nuclear Weapons Obsolete*. As everyone familiar with the debate knows, Jastrow is the single most influential proponent of SDI outside the government. With a Ph.D. in theoretical physics from Columbia University, postdoctoral study at Leiden, Berkeley, and the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton, and his former positions as founder of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies and chairman of its Lunar Exploration Committee, he has the kind of scientific credibility that makes things awfully sticky for SDI opponents. It's one thing to simper behind one's hand at what an ignoramus Ronald Reagan is, but quite another to patronize so eminent a scientist, writer, and administrator as Jastrow.

Not that he is *necessarily* right and opponents wrong about SDI. But one would suppose that simple prudence would impel critics to take his work seriously and to attempt to refute his arguments on the merits. All the more so in light of this new book, which is short and lucid enough for even the giants of the Nuclear Freeze and No First Use movements to comprehend.

Karl O'Lessker is senior editor of this journal, professor of public and environmental affairs at Indiana University, and senior research fellow of the Hudson Institute.

Jastrow begins with a succinct description of the current strategic reality: The United States has no



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