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by Ramparts Magazine, Inc.

301 Broadway
San Francisco, California
Telephone: YU 1-4070

Cable Address:
RAMPARTS, San Francisco

(cover photo by U.P.I.)

RAMPARTS is published monthly by Ramparts Magazine, Inc. MAIN OFFICES: 301 Broadway, San Francisco, California. Telephone YU 1-4070; NEW YORK OFFICES: 10 Sheridan Square, New York 14, N.Y., Telephone WA 4-5525; PARIS OFFICE: 86 Rue de Lille, Paris. MUNICH OFFICE: Altmüllerstrasse 1/III, 8 München 13. Subscription rates: \$7, one year; \$13, two years in U.S.A. and possessions. Foreign rate: \$8, one year; \$15, two years. Single issue, 75 cents. Copyright © 1966 by Ramparts Magazine, Inc. All rights reserved. MANUSCRIPTS: Unsolicited manuscripts submitted to RAMPARTS should be sent with return postage and self-addressed envelope. RAMPARTS editors assume no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. Second copies should be retained by writer. EDITORIAL AND ADVERTISING CORRESPONDENCE: All editorial and advertising correspondence should be mailed to 301 Broadway, San Francisco, California. SUBSCRIPTION CORRESPONDENCE: All subscription correspondence, including address changes, should be mailed to RAMPARTS Subscription Dept., 1255 Portland Place, Boulder, Colorado 80302. For change of address, send both new and old address (enclose recent magazine address label, if possible). Please allow six weeks for change of address. Second-class postage paid at San Francisco, California, New York, N.Y., and at additional mailing offices. Printed in the United States of America.

Opinion:



THE VIETNAM ELECTIONS

by Marshall Windmiller

I SPENT TEN DAYS in Saigon just before the election interviewing politicians, Buddhist leaders, intellectuals, Catholics and students. Among these people cynicism and contempt for the government were the overwhelming sentiments and the elections were regarded as a farce.

In the electoral history of Vietnam, elections have been tightly controlled charades designed to enable authoritarian governments to claim legitimacy and popular support.

This has been the pattern in both North and South Vietnam, and the respective regimes have always pointed with pride to the large voter turnout as evidence of popular support for the government and its electoral procedures. In the National Assembly elections in North Vietnam on May 8, 1960, 97% of the eligible voters voted and a third of the polling centers even recorded a 100% turnout. Ho Chi Minh was returned in his constituency by 99% of the voters. Similarly, in the Presidential election in South Vietnam held on April 9, 1961, 85% of the electorate voted and Premier Ngo Dinh Diem received 89% of the total. In the National Assembly elections held September 27, 1963, just before the overthrow of the Diem regime, 93% of the voters voted, and Diem received 99.9% and Madame Nhu received 99.8%.

Few American commentators would now assert that any of the above events represent even an approximation of democracy. But with the announcement by the Saigon government that the voter turnout in the September 11, 1966 elections was 80.8%, American government and journalistic opinion hailed the election as a great step to-

ward democracy. "It shows," said the President's foreign policy adviser, W. W. Rostow, "that the people of this country, by and large, given the chance to vote, move in the direction of democracy. It's a good step and heartening for all those in the world who believe that in the end power resides with the people."

The purpose of the election was to elect a constituent assembly of 117 members. The duty of this body is to draft a new constitution, and its composition and rules of procedure were spelled out in Decree No. 21/66 issued by the Saigon regime on June 19, 1966. Article 20 of the decree provides that the present government can amend the draft constitution in any way it likes if it can muster one-third of the votes plus one. Thus to turn the constituent assembly into a rubber stamp, the government needed to elect only 40 of its people. In its Decree No. 22/66 it made sure that this would be easy. This law describes the electoral procedures. It is a long and complicated document which I found most people, including some government officials, didn't understand. It provided for a list system of voting wherein the voters had to choose among lists rather than among individual candidates. Yet the members of the lists did not share a common party or platform. Government candidates were so distributed among the lists as to guarantee a high percentage of winners. For double insurance, military personnel were permitted to vote wherever they happened to be on election day. Thus flying squads of troops could be moved into doubtful constituencies.

THE CHOICE of candidates was not impressive, for the electoral law specifically banned "those who, directly or indirectly, act for the benefit of Communists and neutralists, or have activities that aid the Communists." The government carefully screened all candidates and admitted to having disqualified 59 out of 539 as "Communists or having a criminal record." Buddhist leaders and well-known critics of the government knew better than to apply. It is reported that there are 5000 Buddhists presently in jail because of previous political activities. Former Premier Phan Huy Quat,

a moderate, did not run and told me that he thought it was more constructive for him not to take a public position for or against the electoral procedures.

The government admitted that 55 candidates were from the armed forces, but these figures were impossible to verify because many military men used their other professional designations, for example, doctor, on the ballot. The law made this possible and in some cases required it. The average voter didn't have the slightest idea whom he was voting for.

The official *U.S. Army Area Handbook for Vietnam* (No. 550-40) describes how a voter turnout was assured in the days of Diem. "Officially," it says, "there is no fine or penalty attached to non-voting. The authorities, however, tend to regard voter participation as a criterion of loyalty, and the citizen may find his motives questioned if his identity card does not show that he has voted."

It was clear in Saigon that the Ky regime had the same attitude. Rumors were widely circulated that voters' cards would be used for rationing or travel passes and that people whose cards lacked the poll cachet would find themselves in trouble later. It was a powerful incentive to vote.

The voters were under contrary pressure from the NLF, and there were several incidents of terrorism apparently designed to frighten voters into staying away from the polls. To some extent then, the election was merely a contest to see whether the government or the NLF had the more effective methods of coercion.

AT ANY GIVEN TIME there are about 1500 foreign journalists in Vietnam. Even if they had organized themselves to divide up the task of reporting the actual voting, they would not have been able to observe all 5230 polling booths scattered throughout the Saigon-controlled territories. The Vietnamese journalists are intimidated and censored, and their reports on a matter of such importance to the government are hardly trustworthy. For these reasons it is impossible to verify the government's claims about the turnout and about the number of blank or spoiled ballots. The regime

ran the show and counted the ballots. It is worth remembering, in addition, that General Ky agreed to the elections, only after the Buddhist uprisings last spring, which were embarrassing to the military regime in Saigon and even more damaging to the claim of American spokesmen that the U.S. was intervening on behalf of the popular government.

The primary purpose for the elections was to create the illusion that the Saigon regime enjoys the support of the Vietnamese people and that American intervention on its behalf is legitimate. With the prestige of Nguyen Cao Ky and Lyndon Johnson riding on the outcome, the high turnout was certainly predictable.

Johnson and Ky may fool the American people and they may be fooling themselves, but visits to New Delhi, Paris and London on my return from Saigon convinced me that they are not fooling many people in these key capitals. I was surprised at the amount of distrust of American policy in Vietnam, and at an anti-Americanism of a magnitude I had never witnessed before.

The repressions of the Ky regime have forced a polarization of Vietnamese politics. For the moment at least the Buddhists and other opposition groups have been weakened by arrests of cadres and by the denial of free speech and a free press. Opponents of the regime are forced underground where they are immediately embraced by the NLF. Ideological differences become blurred and Catholics and Buddhists alike find themselves working with the NLF whose organization is intact, strong, and growing. Hostility to Ky and to his American backers provide the common bond. At one time the Buddhists provided an alternative to Ky and the NLF. Now they are being inexorably pushed into the arms of the Communists. Johnson and Ky may advertise their 80.8%, but it will not change the fact that they are sitting on top of a rumbling volcano.

Marshall Windmiller, an associate professor of International Relations at San Francisco State University, is the co-author of Communism in India and author of Five Years in Free Radio.

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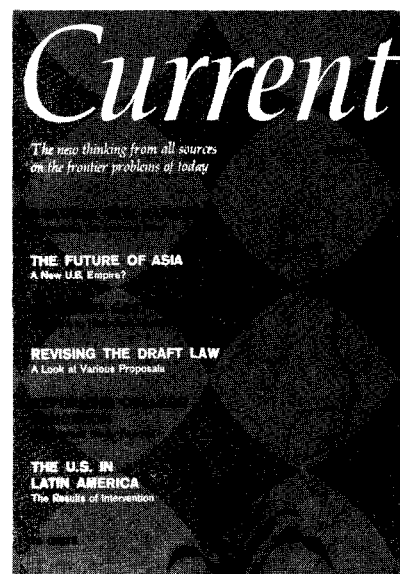
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AMERICA'S FOREIGN LEGION

by Sol Stern

C IN THE WASHINGTON headquarters of Selective Service Chief Lewis G. Hershey, hangs a glass encased scroll identified as "Haile Selassie's mobilization order to the Ethiopians" when that country was invaded by Italy in 1935. The order reads



**To further
the cause of
peace in Vietnam
and
social justice
in America,
help re-elect
John L. Burton
Assemblyman
from the state
of California.
Send any
contributions
to Burton
for Assembly,
995 Market Street,
San Francisco,
California.**



as follows: "Everyone will now be mobilized and all boys old enough to carry a spear will be sent to Addis Ababa. Married men will take their wives to carry food and cook. Those without wives will take any women without a husband. Women with small babies need not go. The blind, those who cannot walk, or for any reason cannot carry a spear are exempted. Anyone found at home after the receipt of this order will be hanged!"

General Hershey has a generous sense of humor. Selective Service doesn't issue such Draconian decrees, but Hershey himself sometimes seems to share Emperor Selassie's idea of service. At 73, the gruff old general is the living incarnation of the Spirit of '76, with his belief in the need for a citizens' army. A hulking, silver-haired, 200-pounder, squinting through old fashioned gold rimmed glasses, Hershey at a congressional hearing is an anachronistic reminder of the American Legion patriotic bombast that still surrounds the myth that all citizens shoulder equally the burden of protecting the nation.

But Hershey's Selective Service System masks the reality. The idea of an equitable, democratic draft has fallen victim to America's new self-appointed role as the white policeman of the world. Instead of a citizens' Army, the Selective Service is turning out a cheap version of a mercenary Army made up of society's rejects. An American foreign legion is emerging out of the crazy quilt and deliberately rigged policies of the Selective Service.

During recent hearings before the House Armed Services Committee, Representative Alvin E. O'Konski told General Hershey, "The system is undemocratic and un-American. It nauseates me. How can I defend it to my people? They say that the poor are always with us, but if the draft goes on this way the poor won't be around much longer." O'Konski cited the shocking statistic that of 100 men drafted from his district in the previous six months, not one had come from a family with an annual income of more than \$5000. Speaking was not a left wing populist but a relatively conservative Republican.

Not only the poor are filling the ranks of America's white policeman's army. Ironically it is also the black in

disproportionate numbers. According to Selective Service spokesmen, Negroes at the present time are being drafted at a rate of 11 per cent, approximating their percentage of the population (for some years the percentage was as high as 15), but this statistic obscures the real story. Significant is the large number of Negro voluntary enlistments and reenlistments, statistics which sadly suggest that the Army offers the average Negro recruit more dignity and financial security than he is likely to find in the civilian world.

C TAKE THE TYPICAL Negro recruit just out of high school. Outside the service he faces the prospect of either unemployment or an unskilled low paying job and a segregated life in a bleak ghetto. If he reenlists there is relative security, increasing financial remuneration and greater status. There will be a reenlistment bonus and periodic pay increases. If he behaves himself he can make sergeant in a few years. If he goes overseas he gets an extra \$20 per month. If he sees combat there is an extra \$55 per month. Overseas he doesn't pay income taxes. Going to Vietnam may be dangerous, but for the non-commissioned officer in a combat unit it could mean anywhere from \$500 to \$1000 per month in take home pay. Not surprisingly, the reenlistment rate among Negro first term volunteers is a staggering 49 per cent—almost three times as high as the rate among whites. Black faces are beginning to fill up the ranks of non-commissioned officers, especially in combat units.

"Mercenaries" is what Stokely Carmichael called them. It is a pathetically apt observation. The Negro has been seduced into the ranks of the white policeman's army by the same society which refuses him any other option for finding dignified work. But the Negro soldier is also paying a very high price. In Vietnam black G.I.'s are contributing 22 per cent of the total casualties. Back home the society which they serve keeps them unemployed at a rate twice as high as among whites.

The poor are drafted and forced to enlist and the blacks are bought. Yet a college educated person who wants to stay out of the service badly enough can, with a little effort, do it—and with-