

The Situation in Southeast Asia

Mission in Torment: An Intimate Account of the U.S. Role in Vietnam, by John Mecklin (Doubleday. 318 pp. \$4.95); ***The Making of a Quagmire***, by David Halberstam (Random House. 323 pp. \$5.95); ***The New Face of War***, by Malcolm W. Browne (Bobbs-Merrill. 284 pp. \$5), and ***Vietnam: Inside Story of the Guerrilla War***, by Wilfred G. Burchett (International. 253 pp. \$4.95), report on what has happened and why in the world's chief trouble-spot. Kenneth T. Young, Jr., was Director of Southeast Asian Affairs for the State Department from 1954 to 1958 and Ambassador to Thailand and SEATO in 1961-63.

By KENNETH T. YOUNG, JR.

AFTER years of scant source material, the literature on Vietnam is catching up with our extending commitment. These four books, though controversial, enlighten many a dark spot in Vietnam's obscure and tangled canvas. The books are all informative, "instant" reporting of what happened and why in Vietnam, according to each author's viewpoint. They deal in slices of time and particular aspects rather than in the broad sweep of events; and, while they usefully expose many, but not all, important segments of the 1961-64 period, they unfortunately skip most of the 1954-60 setting.

No one will find solutions to the Vietnamese problem in these books. The authors do not try to foretell the future or show the way out for either side. Many aspects of the complex problem are not even touched—U.S. aid, diplomatic issues, negotiations, the regional framework in Southeast Asia, and the role of other nations participating on both sides of this international war. However, we can profit from reading all of them to gain a better understanding of the American, Vietnamese, and Communist roles in the struggle.

In *The Making of a Quagmire* David Halberstam of the *New York Times*, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his reporting out of Vietnam in 1962-63, focuses on the rights of journalists and their clash with officials, on political developments at the Saigon level, and on military

operations in the key delta area. He criticizes forcefully and, I think, quite accurately the excesses of the Ngo family, the false optimism of that period, and the inadequacies of American efforts. Washington will not like his book; neither will Hanoi. He deals well with his material, but covers only what he saw in those two years. Besides chapter headings and an index, a larger perspective would have improved this thoughtful if controversial interpretation.

John Mecklin, reporter and head of the United States Information Service in Saigon in 1962-64, writes from a personal though official viewpoint in his *Mission in Torment*. His special contribution is a candid account of the unfortunate breakdown in communications between the U.S. Mission and American reporters in Saigon. He also gives us some "inside" information about American reactions and activities in the Buddhist crisis and anti-Diem revolt of 1963, without revealing whether he knew how deeply we were involved in that coup. He presents helpful perspectives on the unhappy legacy of the past in Vietnam and on the vital psychological and political struggle in the countryside, where 85 per cent of the Vietnamese live, in addition to debatable options for the future in his excellent concluding chapter on the "Guerrilla Gap."

FOR fast and easy reading, Malcolm Browne, another Pulitzer Prize-winner for reporting out of Vietnam, gives us the sights, sounds, and smells of battle with the Vietcong in his *New Face of War*. But, more important, he shows the new pattern of war which we are encountering for the first time in the Vietnamese struggle, for which we need a "new kind of bat to stay in the game." His book, which has a preface by Cabot



Lodge, is full of valuable and truthful insights on political action, Vietcong terrorism, guerrilla tactics, propaganda, and the uncomplimentary contrast between the "face" of war on our side and that on the other. We need to understand the contrast, and learn to do better.

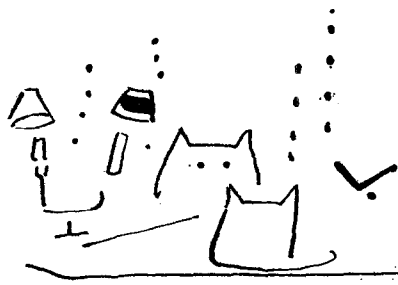
Vietnam: Inside Story of the Guerrilla War was written by the Australian Communist journalist Wilfred G. Burchett, who has spent many years in the Communist East—in China, Vietnam, and Korea. He appeared from the other side, and not very cooperatively, as I recall, in our press briefings at Panmunjom. But, allowing for his obvious sympathy for the Vietcong or Vietnamese Communists (both terms he abhors and avoids in this book), we can learn something about their movement (the National Liberation Front, as the Communists term it). Burchett does speak from firsthand observation on his own travels and talks in Communist-controlled areas in South Vietnam and Hanoi. He narrates the history of the "NLF": its development, objectives, tactics, and successes, and its failures, too. Many of his details dovetail with those supplied by the American authors under review. However, he disingenuously tries to prove that the National Liberation Front is an indigenous movement without direction or support from the Communist government in Hanoi, while the American reporters demonstrate that the reverse is nearer the truth. This compromises the credibility of Burchett's book, as does his glossing over Communist terrorism. On these and other scores one can read two totally opposing versions of the situation in Vietnam—which, after all, is what the struggle is about. Burchett does give us a readable, intelligible account, whatever its propaganda and distortions, about a political phenomenon we need to understand.

Burchett raises an interesting question: Was there a favorable turning point for us in 1962? While many Americans, including some of these authors, believe that the war was being lost, Burchett tells us from the other side that it was "Diem's year." I find significant his revelation that the National Liberation Front in the strategic delta area south of Saigon had almost reached the point of giving up the war there and withdrawing to the mountains (as they have done recently, for as yet unknown and perhaps different reasons). According to Burchett, the high mobility of the helicopter war, the sudden and successful organization of many strategic hamlets, and the massive input of American economic and military aid seemed "too high a price" for the Vietcong to pay. However, instead of making a strategic withdrawal, the Vietcong turned the tide back against Diem and the Americans by exploiting the "forced

massing" of the Vietnamese population into these strategic hamlets. Several of the American authors under review would also agree that Diem and the Saigon government lost the peasants' support through this action.

According to seemingly authentic documents and statements in these books, the Vietcong claim that their main job is to establish themselves "in the hearts of the people." As the American authors emphasize, this is the real problem in Vietnam: political and psychological victory as much as military success in the "paddies and hamlets," as Mecklin puts it. And Browne and Halberstam both warn that there is much more to the Vietcong than terrorism and "something more to winning a revolutionary war than helicopters." The theme of "a war of men and ideas," in Halberstam's phrase, threads its way through these books, spotlighting the need for effective political action in village and countryside.

Halberstam believes that the mistakes of the Vietnamese and Americans caused the war to deteriorate seriously in 1962 and 1963, to the point of near loss. He severely indicts the Ngo family—particularly Mr. and Mrs. Nhu—on many counts which this reviewer endorses. He sums up the tragedy of a good man when he says that Diem, "who could never have been corrupted by worldly goods, became corrupted by power and pride." That explains his final fall, despite his earlier services to Vietnam's nationalist revolution.



What began in 1954-56 as a nationalist revolution ended as a mandarin state of repression, whose fatal cancer was Nhu—husband and wife. Browne, Mecklin, and Halberstam all expose the Nhuses' pretentious ambitions and morbid suspicions that poisoned official relations between the Americans and the Vietnamese and alienated practically all urban Vietnamese, as well as many in the countryside. Mecklin also correctly portrays Diem as neither a popular figure nor a good administrator. He became not only the Nhuses' accomplice, but their prisoner during the last months of his life. While these books all question the wisdom of our embracing Diem in the first place, they agree that we could never have separated the two brothers to save Diem or avoid the inevitable débacle. The real issue, as Halberstam notes, was whether the U.S. would have done better in that period to attach important political conditions to its aid and insist on Diem's and Nhuses' accepting them, rather than backing down as we apparently did.

The Diem débacle is excellently re-

counted nearly minute-by-minute by Halberstam and Mecklin. A popular revolt, crystallized into the so-called Buddhist movement, became an attractive and feasible rallying ground for opposition elements as the Nhu repression grew. Both authors indicate an apparent lack of American contact with Vietnamese opinion, not only in this particular crisis but during the entire period under review. Perhaps American officials who were there at the time would strongly disagree; but it is disturbing to read the judgment of these authors that Americans failed to reach the people or to keep in touch with what was really happening politically, or even with the actual movements and operations of Vietnamese military units. There seems also to have been a vertical communications gap between the American Mission in Saigon and its many civilian and military advisers and technicians out in the field. This is probably the inherent blind spot in an orthodox approach to social upheavals.

WHAT emerges even more significantly from the coup of 1963 is the evident failure of the Americans and Vietnamese to be ready with a new political program and a better political organization. The rule is never to "coup" without follow-through; and we will pay for that lapse for a long time.

Ambassador Nolting and General Harkins, while portrayed as likable, dedicated, vigorous men, are criticized too hastily, I think. They were executing policies determined in Washington: first to restore and maintain some semblance of a working relationship with Diem as long as possible, and then to carry out the Kennedy-McNamara-Taylor counter-insurgency program on a massive and immediate scale. Despite some criticism of him, Ambassador Lodge, who was playing a difficult new game, is also sympathetically cast in these books. We must remember that it is hard for men in such positions during fast-moving, critical developments to knock the team while cheering it on. No one scores touchdowns that way.

These books make valuable contributions by telling us much about the "enemy" or the "other" side, and about ourselves from the Vietnamese viewpoint. Some of this may be hard to take, but it will test our mettle and prove our maturity if we can go on to learn from our mistakes. All these authors consider Vietnam vital. Except for Burchett, they end on a hopeful note for us: they believe that by learning our lessons and improving political and military operations we can achieve success, although they do not define it.

As David Halberstam concludes, "We do have something to offer these emerging nations."

To Eric, Not to Make Too Much of Time

By Harold Witt

SELL Kool Aid always on the summer road—no, just for now be glad you're not yet nine, watching those tadpoles sprouting into toads, coming through sunshine and leafdappled light. All boys but Peter Pan stop running home goldhanded, holding rapture's butterfly.

But for a little while yell to all those grime green kids and grown ups going by, "Delicious flavors, cheap, 2¢, ice cold," and wondering, bend, before you're old and sly, as tails drop off and toadfeet slowly grow; dig the dirt deep, my still nine summers' boy.

Myth maker, player with a bow, arrowing apples from the timeworn tree, eyeing TV; you don't fool me, I know how much you wish for cruel maturity of size and age, and do not want to be, even one summer, only eight or so.