

The Nation Beyond Saigon

Vietnam: Yesterday and Today, by Ellen Hammer (Holt, Rinehart & Winston. 282 pp. Hardbound, \$3.95; paperback, \$3.95), and ***Here Is Your Enemy: James Cameron's Complete Report from North Vietnam***, by James Cameron (Holt, Rinehart & Winston. 144 pp. \$3.95), delve into the historical background, the national character, and the future prospects of a frequently divided country. Kenneth T. Young is president of the Asia Society.

By KENNETH T. YOUNG

IN THE long run our "knowledge quotient" about Vietnam will be more important than the "kill ratio." We would be a lot farther along now in dealing with the country's political evolution if we knew more about Vietnamese history and the Vietnamese character. We have to deal with two simultaneous revolutions and two countermovements within one of them. The South Vietnamese have been trying to generate both a nationalist revolution for genuine independence and one against Communist doctrine; the nationalist revolution in turn is split by the need for national discipline and the urge for national expression. The resolution remains in doubt because these sturdy, valiant, and remarkable people are so contradictory. Not yet a nation, they are a collection of societies.

Those who are looking for the basic introductory book on Vietnam need search no longer. Miss Hammer's *Vietnam: Yesterday and Today* fills the gap admirably. In this fifth volume of the Contemporary Civilizations Series, so ably edited by Professor Vera Micheles Dean of New York University, Miss Hammer has made her second important contribution to our knowledge of Vietnam. *The Struggle for Indochina*, covering the 1940-1954 period, served me indispensably in the State Department during the baffling beginnings of our direct encounter with Vietnam in 1954-1956. Her new book is a crisply written, cool interpretation which displays a comprehensive grasp of the totality of Vietnam, over its long history as well as in today's headlines. The volume has been ordered in large quantity by the U.S. Army, and we taxpayers would get our money's worth out of the billions being poured into Vietnam if every G.I. could

become as familiar with it as with his rifle. It might even be useful for some legislators, high officials, commentators, editorialists, and critics of United States policy in Southeast Asia.

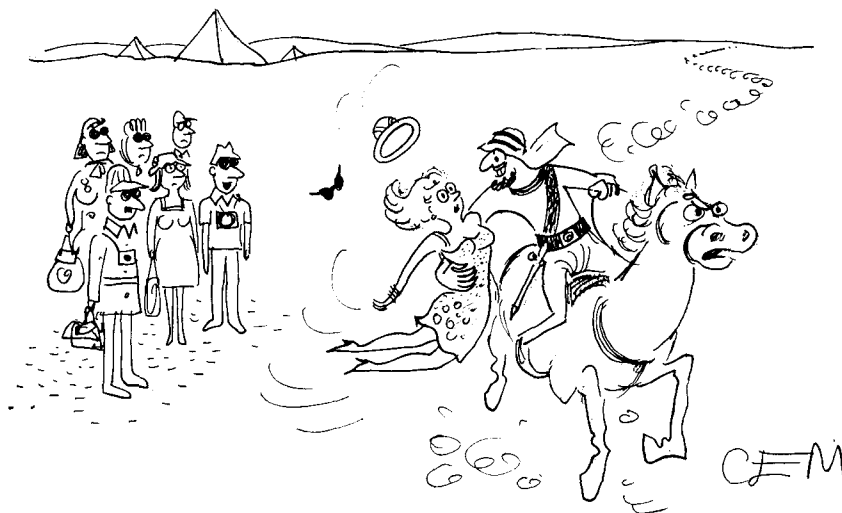
Miss Hammer's emphasis is political, economic, and diplomatic, with brief attention to the arts, letters, and education, which have always played such an important role for the Vietnamese. She makes the telling admonition that Western blunders and frustrations in political dealings with the Vietnamese stem from the failure "to look beyond a veneer of Westernization in language and education to more fundamental aspects of the national character." In summarizing Vietnam's history she highlights the harsh effects of geography and invasion, the complexities of many ethnic minorities, and the varieties of religious observance — Animism, Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity, and now modernism.

Vietnam is as eclectic and diverse as, if not more so than, other countries in Southeast Asia, but with a difference. The thread that runs all through the book is the unending struggle of these different groups to maintain a nation for any length of time. This struggle has shaped what Miss Hammer rightly calls the "distinctively Vietnamese" civilization. Many of the present political difficulties and regional tensions in Vietnam have historical antecedents. There is no need to be surprised or perplexed by the Buddhist crises of 1963 or 1966; they are repetitions of what has hap-

pened before. North vs. South; Hue vs. Saigon; Buddhist vs. Confucian or Catholic—is shorthand for Vietnamese history.

It is well to be reminded that all of Vietnam, from the Chinese frontier to the Gulf of Thailand, became one country under one Vietnamese administration for the first time only a century and a half ago. French colonialism ended what might have been a promising development of a unified nation. As Miss Hammer brings out, the Vietnamese people have never had a relevant role in political affairs. The history of Vietnam's political, social, and economic institutions has been government by the few—Chinese overlords, Vietnamese nobles, French colonials, and Marxist or nationalist officials, sometimes in the interest of the population but never with its sufficient participation.

Some of the factors accounting for the present predicament of Vietnamese nationalism need to be appreciated: the inability of the orthodox, static system of the nineteenth century to cope with the West as the Thai kingdom did; the stunting under the French of Vietnam's modern expression, and the capture of the nationalist independence movement by the Communists, largely as a result of the decimation of non-Communist Vietnamese nationalists during the past forty years. I regret Miss Hammer's misjudgment of some aspects of United States policy in Vietnam. It was not our intention in 1954-1956 to turn a weak South Vietnam into a "spearhead of militant anti-Communism in Asia." Rather, our purpose was to encourage a genuinely nationalist movement composed of as many elements as possible south of the 17th Parallel. We emphasized new institutions, land reform, and rural development. By this policy we hoped to develop the South as a political magnet to balance the North. Whatever the failures, in originally supporting Ngo



"It's probably one of the extras that Pyramid Tours promised us."

Dinh Diem the United States did address itself to seeking new opportunities for real Vietnamese nationalism. Yet I am impressed with Miss Hammer's balanced and compassionate treatment of this tragic and controversial man.

Many may share Miss Hammer's difficulty in understanding how United States officials apparently could have encouraged the fateful overthrow of Diem "without making any provision for filling the political vacuum inevitably created by that coup." She obviously deplures, as anyone must, the resultant disruption of the developing security and stability in South Vietnam. I am glad to see that she gives General Harkins overdue recognition for his understanding of Diem's approach to local military problems.

Miss Hammer balances her descriptions of South Vietnam with an account of the development of Communist North Vietnam. Her sympathies are not with the Communist Party or its apparatus, the Viet Cong, in the South. But she does give relatively objective treatment to internal and diplomatic affairs in the North. Among other things, she describes the terrible pressures of Hanoi's land reform program of 1954-1956, in which thousands of people were tortured and executed according to the Communist Party's own admissions.

Looking ahead, which is our task now, Miss Hammer puts her finger on serious dangers in the South: the gap between the urban and rural populations, the lack of leaders, the many divisive factors, and the segregation of the army from the people.

She does not address herself to issues of American policy. She notes that the

Geneva Accords of 1954 contained specific provisions only for a cease-fire, disengagement, and regroupment of French and Vietminh forces, and provided no details or long-term perspective for a definitive settlement of the Vietnamese question. In her comparisons of the prospects of the North and the South in 1965, the assets of the North would seem to outweigh those of the South. Miss Hammer is deeply concerned that Chinese influence over the North may end by forcing it irreversibly into a new Chinese empire. However, her book ends on a note of confidence. She has faith, which I share, that the desire for independence, the political influence of dedicated young army officers (I would add young civilians), and the agricultural resources of South Vietnam will keep it alive and eventually promote its development as a non-Communist, independent, and prosperous state.

MISS Hammer's book agrees with James Cameron's *Here Is Your Enemy* on two significant points. Both cite indications that American bombing in the North has had the effect of hardening and unifying the people and the Communist régime. Mr. Cameron's firsthand observations lead him to call every bomb a bonus for Ho Chi Minh. His personal conviction is one of total opposition to American policy in Vietnam.

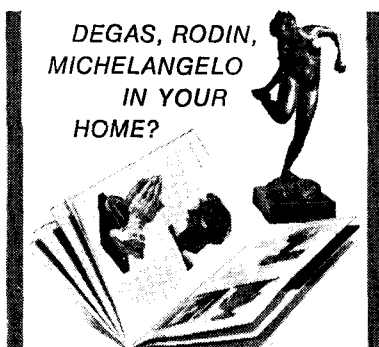
Of more long-run significance, both Miss Hammer and Mr. Cameron highlight the ignorance of Hanoi leaders about the world in general. North Vietnam's greatest liability, according to Miss Hammer, is Hanoi's blind pursuit of victory at any cost, which causes the Northern leaders "to act like sleepwalkers unaware of the course of history" and the realities of the twentieth century in their refusal to consider political compromise and peaceful nego-

tiation. Mr. Cameron left after several weeks in Hanoi—including a meeting with Ho Chi Minh and Prime Minister Pham Van Dong—with no doubt that the Communist régime understood extremely little about "the language of international persuasion or even of international facts." Indeed, he was concerned that the Hanoi leadership greatly exaggerated the protest movement against United States policy.

The two books also concur in their appreciation of the stern, tough fiber in Vietnamese character. In words which Americans should constantly remember, Mr. Cameron emphasizes the "singular resilience and continuity of the Vietnamese, who are, despite the graceful and beguilingly diffident tactfulness of their demeanor, among the toughest and most unanswerable people on earth."

Otherwise, Mr. Cameron's book is a disappointment to me. It is subtitled "Complete Report from North Vietnam." I wish it were. I had hoped to learn something about the way the North Vietnamese live, work, and react. Despite the usual totalitarian controls, Mr. Cameron had an opportunity unique for a non-Communist Western journalist to be our eyes and ears on a perfectly open basis in North Vietnam. To me, he missed the chance; his short book is overly simplistic and diaristic. He spends too many pages on hotels and airports and not enough in telling us about conditions in the North. But perhaps he was prevented.

In any event, I found his book skimpy and pretentious. This is unfortunate, because we need to know everything we can find out about the people (who are not our enemy) and circumstances in North Vietnam, where the authorities (who are) will decide to prolong or shorten their subversive warfare against South Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand.



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