



Vietnam—Land Speculators in Action

(From an article by Frank Herbert in the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*)

QUIET BUT INTENSIVE real estate speculation to take advantage of land reform legislation is going on right now all through the Mekong delta and the central lowlands of South Vietnam. Its sources reach into the middle echelons of the Saigon government.

What you must grasp about this land speculation is that it is accompanied by brutal suppression of protest, mostly at the hands of some units of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam in which we place such great hopes. ARVN tactics on occasion include dropping artillery rounds "by mistake" on to recalcitrant villagers asleep in their huts at night.

Operating behind ARVN muscle, the land speculation takes two basic forms: (1) buying up options at prices well below what would be paid under a land reform programme, and (2) paying outrageously low prices for property in insecure areas.

I have talked to land owners who accepted 3,000 piasters per hectare for land in areas controlled by ARVN during the day and by the Viet Cong at night. (There are 118 piasters to the U.S. dollar). There are authoritative reports of prices as low as 2,000 piasters per hectare in such areas. These prices work out to about 18 to 25 dollars for two and a half acres. Compensation prices now being discussed for land taken over under the reform programme average 45,000 piasters per hectare. They go up to more than four times that price, and even to twenty times that price, for exceptionally choice lands.

What disturbs the American conscience is discovery that the land speculation teams operate with the information that has to be fed from key points in key ministries.

Another thing is that much of South Vietnam's "open handed dispensation" of former French lands to the peasantry has been on the basis of political promises.

To understand the rural response, you have to realise how unutterably war-weary the people are. They are as sick of the Viet Cong as they are of Saigon—and this fact alone could account for the drop in Viet Cong recruiting noted over the past year.

Conclusion number one to be derived from these revelations is that forces within the Saigon government are firmly committed to land reform. The guns are being turned away from the peasantry and against the landlords. If this programme is carried out quickly and thoroughly it can only help to bring political stability to South Vietnam. People will fight for their own land.

This is a lesson we've learned in South Korea, in Bolivia, in Japan, in Mexico and Iran.

The Saigon government also is aware that every dynasty in Vietnamese history has begun with successful land reform. If they can carry this off—on their terms and with their methods—the war may be shortened by many years.

The clear danger, then, is that discovery of these actions, which we call corruption, turn us so much against South Vietnam that we abandon that country.

Our task is to read the political indicators clearly in Oriental terms. If we make the wrong decision now, we could be out of the war by this time next year—but with enormous loss of prestige throughout the world, and with nothing to show for our thousands of lives and our billions of dollars except a sad lesson. If, however, we back Saigon with land compensation money, thus virtually eliminating landlord opposition, we can gain what we've sought all along—a strong South Vietnam firmly committed to support of the U.S.

The lesson would be plain to all South East Asia. Meanwhile, those who are persuaded that all would be lovely and equitable under a land reform program initiated by the North Vietnamese Communists in South Vietnam should be reminded that land reform or collectivisation efforts under Communists historically are accompanied by blood baths. It was true in Russia. It was true in China. And North Vietnamese peasants who took part in a 1954 revolt against Hanoi have not been heard from since. Eight thousand among the peasants of North Vietnam who resisted collectivisation were executed out of hand.

Of major importance in all of this is the fact that South Vietnam's effort toward land reform is being attempted through democratic processes. If the North Vietnamese take over South Vietnam, there will be a land reform! No question about that. But in a sea of blood.

The U.S. has guaranteed \$10 million from 1969 funds toward landlord compensation under a land reform program. We also have agreed to ask for another \$30 million next year for the same purpose. Our task, then, should be to make it clear that we are not going to spend any more American lives to sustain a nineteenth century mandarin oligarchy. Either South Vietnam undertakes some of the basic twentieth century reforms, such as in South Korea, and notably Mexico, or it forfeits the right to further help from us.