

Land Reform Comes to Vietnam

by OSCAR B. JOHANSEN

THE Viet Cong were offering the peasants land; Saigon was offering a constitution." In these succinct words, Professor Roy Prosterman of the University of Washington summed up the rationale of the war in Vietnam and the apathy of the South Vietnamese toward it. That prominent American politicos and others could believe the peasants, rack-rented to death, cared one iota about something as vague as electoral reform, indicates the degree of intelligence with which this entire conflict has been prosecuted.

While government officials are hemmed in by political and bureaucratic restrictions, fortunately, private citizens are not. The Tet offensive galvanized Prosterman into obtaining Congressional support for a Vietnamese land reform he had been advocating for years. With the aid of another private citizen, Robert Coate, who donated his own time and money, they generated sufficient pressure to institute a reform which has just now after years of a sickening bloodbath been enacted into Vietnamese law.

According to The National Observer, the reform has the cardinal virtue of simplicity. Tenants will get title to the land they farm up to 7½ acres. Under this program about 60 percent of the cultivated land, more than 250,000,000 acres, will be redistributed, with the landowners being paid between \$150 and \$200 an acre in Vietnamese government bonds. It should not come as a surprise that the bonds are to be supported by the U.S. government who may eventually foot the entire bill. That is par for the course, and why the landlords finally acceded.

Two-thirds of the land may be distributed by December with the full impact coming early next year at harvest time. Prosterman says: "Then the

peasants will really feel the benefits of not having to turn over a third or half their crops to the landlord." Apparently the communists are worried, for they have been broadcasting that the promises of land reform were phony. Now in a sudden switch they are arguing they have a program that is better than Saigon's.

It is one thing to establish a land reform and another to implement it. Only if the implementation is good will the peasants feel they really have something to fight for. The Vietnamization of the war will then have possibilities of being successful.

Georgists are not impressed by this type of land reform. Certainly they do not approve of paying the landlords for something the Almighty gave to all mankind as a free gift. And they are only too well aware that the number of landlords will not be increased by the millions, making true land reform that much more difficult. It will improve the economy, as it did in Iran, but it will not eliminate poverty and unemployment. It certainly will not achieve the desired goal of opportunity for individuals according to their ability.

What is of interest to Georgists is the fact that his reform was largely the work of two private citizens—Prosterman and Coate. Here two determined men prevailed against entrenched bureaucracy, greed, inertia and stupidity, to attain an end which may have greater effect on achieving peace than the power of the mighty U.S. government.

Just as these two men were able to accomplish much, so may we, though few in number, exert our influence when the time is ripe, and the time may be approaching more rapidly than we realize.