

PREFACE

The rapid re-entry, in the early 1990s, of the erstwhile "bastion of socialism in Southeast Asia" into the world of market economies and (eventually) pluralist politics undeniably represents a turning point in world history. It should be an opportune time as well to reflect on the probability that so much time and trouble that they frustratingly spent in getting *there* would have been spared the Vietnamese, had a Third-Force solution to the conflict sufficiently prevailed before the communists took power in South Vietnam in 1975.

Notably, in such a scenario Vietnam would have avoided the bloodshed, the interminable cycle of reprisals and counter-reprisals, the technological stagnation and backwardness which its post-1975 isolation from Asia and the rest of the world only reinforced. The North's reunification with the South would have taken place under non-communist auspices, and the country would have been admitted to ASEAN. Perhaps, even, Vietnam would already be enjoying NIC status by the end of the 20th century. (After all, in the 1990s it was the only Confucian society left which had not yet joined the ranks of the famous Asian "dragons".) But all that is so much smug wisdom after the fact; as far as this observer is now concerned, the Vietnamese seem to be doing the right thing *today*, i.e. they are seeing to it that the capitalist stage of development is adequately, if not fully achieved before activating the mechanisms of an allegedly higher order (*viz.* socialism) to supersede it.

The lasting relevance of the Third Force option can be better appreciated in the light of the momentous events which literally changed the face of the globe between the late 1980s and the early 1990s.

What had earlier transpired in Vietnam prefigured the lasting ideological issues of the present time. Doesn't the idea of a halfway house between "unbridled capitalism" and "totalitarian communism" continue to sustain the mainstream liberal argument for a fairer, more enlightened global order? Isn't the prospect of a moderate political and economic *common sense* which consciously avoids one ideological extreme and the other, still considered valid by those idealists who instinctively recoil from the dogmatism and loss of personal freedom usually associated with Marxist regimes on the one hand, and shun the egoistic materialism that is endemic in free-enterprise societies of the West on the other?

Undoubtedly, the prejudices of the Vietnamese communists' ideology — plus the basic insecurity inherent in the Vietnamese revolutionary project — foreclosed all possibility of such a political and economic "third way" ever being

adopted as the new revolutionary order. It is only too easy, with the benefit of hindsight, to criticize the Lao Dong (Workers') Party for having imposed its hardline policies on Vietnamese society even before seizing power in 1975: it wasn't a Western social-democrat party, after all. It is more difficult to explain why the US government made it very hard, if not impossible, for the original Third Force to prosper. It is as if Washington and Hanoi conspired to shut out all moderate solutions to the Vietnamese crisis. The sentiment of being overwhelmed by forces beyond his control is a constant leitmotif in Duong Van Minh's evolution; it also makes him a "noble failure", as may be gleaned from my sympathetic treatment of his acceptance of the unenviable role he played in the unfolding drama.

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In a sense this study has been akin to detective work. From the welter of so-called bare facts as these appeared to me — across a geographical and cultural distance, a circumstance which obliged me to strive for more objectivity than I was otherwise capable of — my self-imposed task was to reconstitute the elusive and sometimes baffling circumstances of the evolution of the so-called Third Force. Leads were checked, clues searched, motivations examined for plausibility. Transparency on the part of the various protagonists could not be presumed: I was always aware that the many-sided dialectic in question was being played out against the backdrop of a bitterly-fought war, whose ideological stakes were very high indeed. Throughout all the stages of this study, and in spite of my pro-revolutionary biases *at the time*, I privileged what I think to be a rigorous approach to the subject.

A brief visit to Ho Chi Minh City in 1991 proved to be highly gratifying: two of my interlocutors, one a communist party cadre active in the urban resistance in its heyday, and another a member of the original Third Force itself, told me that my "reconstruction" of the movement was accurate in general. But should there be any errors of fact and interpretation — and I doubt having avoided making any — the responsibility is obviously all mine.

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CHAPTER I

ORIGINS AND DEFINITIONS

Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American*, first published in 1955, prophetically evoked the creation of a Third Force in South Vietnam.¹ As envisioned by its proponent Alden Pyle, the "quiet American" working at the Economic Aid Mission in Saigon, a Third Force would beat the communists where the French-supported government could not. Equated with "national democracy" and undefined in its dialectical relationship to the supposed two other "forces," Alden Pyle's Third Force was at best an imaginary (but unsuccessful) solution to the struggle between neocolonialism and communism in Asia. But this obsession with a third alternative persisted, beyond the fictional framework, through the next two decades in the very real world of South Vietnamese politics.

Diverse origins. - Almost literally forever being born, the Third Force movement in South Vietnam defies dating where origins are concerned. Depending on the circumstances or the source, it may be said to have originated in 1960, 1963, 1965, 1969, 1972 or 1973-74.

1) 1960: *Le Monde* reporter Jean-Claude Pomonti traced the origins of the Third Force to this year, when the so-called "Caravellists" turned against president Ngo Dinh Diem.² Eighteen prominent politicians and anti-communists gathered at the Hotel Caravelle in Saigon and issued a manifesto remonstrating with Diem over a resurgence of communist violence. As a solution to the problem, the group demanded liberalization and an end to the Diem family's domination of the civil service and the armed forces.³

2) 1963: André Menras, a French volunteer teacher in South Vietnam involved in the urban activism of the late 1960s, referred to the Third Force as a "peace movement" which "emerged as a powerful force in 1963 in opposition to Ngo Dinh Diem's policies."⁴

3) 1965: In a 1971 article, Alfred Hassler, the national executive secretary of the "Fellowship of Reconciliation" having ties with Third Force leaders, claimed that the Third Force's "existence and actions have been visible for the last six years," i.e., since 1965.⁵

¹ Graham Greene, *The Quiet American* (New York: Viking Press, 1956). Published in many editions, both hardbound and paperback, this novel was considered "must" reading for every American in South Vietnam.

² Jean-Claude Pomonti, *La Rage d'Etre Vietnamien* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1974), p. 242.

³ See Joseph Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Political History* (New York: Praeger, 1968), pp. 449-450. See also Dennis Duncanson, *Government and Revolution in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 267-270.

⁴ André Menras, "How America Mocked the Ceasefire: Vietnam Since the Paris Agreement", *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, Nov.-Dec., 1974, p. 25.

⁵ Alfred Hassler, "They Call it a Third Solution," in *Moral Argument and the War in Vietnam*, ed. by Paul Menzel (Nashville: Aurora Publishers, 1971), p. 202.

1965 also was the year when US combat troops first landed in South Vietnam, and when an unidentified Buddhist student leader of the "Struggle Movement" confided to Don Luce and John Sommer of the International Volunteer Services that "What we need in Vietnam now is a Third Force."⁶

4) 1969: *Le Monde* reporter Jacques Decornoy, in a 1975 profile of Gen. Duong Van Minh, mentioned the appearance in the autumn of 1969 of a "third component" (*troisieme composante*), of which Minh was the alleged spokesman.⁷

5) 1972: As far as the communists were concerned, the Third Force emerged only in 1972. In a year-end review, the Hanoi monthly *Vietnam Courier* noted that "In Saigon, a third force was coming into being as a challenge to that tinhorn dictator [Nguyen Van Thieu] who persisted in denying its existence."⁸ Previously, communist media in both North and South Vietnam had accorded prominence to the urban non-communist opposition, but had stopped short of calling it a Third Force.

6) 1973-74: According to the American political scientist Paul M. Kattenburg, "it was generally apparent throughout 1973 and early 1974 that a 'third force' existed in the minds and wishes of many South Vietnamese and the actions of a few, but that it did not emerge as a 'significant factor' until late 1974."⁹ The latter observation is corroborated by the US-based, pro-PRG (Provisional Revolutionary Government) periodical *Indochina Chronicle*.¹⁰

Differing perceptions of the movement. - A similar lack of unanimity prevails over the question of defining the Third Force. What was the Third Force, who constituted it, and what were its aspirations, intentions and attitudes vis-à-vis the First and Second Forces, i.e., the RVN regime and the PRG? Again, there are almost as many definitions as there are sources, and the basic attitudes of the users of the term or of its definers certainly colored their perceptions of the movement and its composition.

For President Nguyen Van Thieu, the Third Force either did not exist, or if it did, it was a mere creation and tool of the communists (see Chapter III). Some observers considered the movement as essentially being an amalgam of opportunist politicians impatient to gain or regain power: Pomonti, for example,

⁶ In Don Luce and John Sommer, *Vietnam: The Unheard Voices* (Ithaca, N. Y.: Cornell University Press, 1969), p. 123.

⁷ Jacques Decornoy, "Tombeur de Diem et Ennemi de Thieu," *Le Monde*, 27-28 April 1975.

⁸ *Vietnam Courier* (Hanoi), December 1972, p. 2.

⁹ Paul Kattenburg, "DRV External Relations in the Revolutionary Phase," in *Communism in Indochina*, ed. by Joseph Zasloff and MacAlister Brown (New York: Lexington Books, 1975), p. 119.

¹⁰ *Indochina Chronicle* (Berkeley), no. 38, p. 6.

thus cynically defined it as "the castoffs of the governments which have succeeded each other in Saigon," and quoted a South Vietnamese interlocutor, named Bac Nam (presumably an alias of this "erudite minor civil servant", as he is described), as posing the rhetorical question: "When one says Third Force, one must think: third solution. Is there a third solution?"¹¹

Others, like the anti-communist historian Joseph Buttinger, identified certain prominent oppositionists as belonging to the Third Force, only to be challenged by detractors who claimed that these oppositionists were actually "First Forcers."¹² But for some others, notably those with sympathies for the PRG, it was a progressive movement, like Menras, quoted above; or Sam Nowmoff, professor of political science at McGill University (Canada), who came very close to defining the PRG's ideal of the Third Force when he defined it as "people who are opposed to Thieu, not members or supporters of the Front, but not hostile to it either."¹³ The anti-war activist Hassler made no secret of his sympathies in identifying four attributes of the Third Force which allegedly made it immediately recognizable as such to observers, viz., it was (1) an urban-based movement, (2) non-violent, (3) non-power seeking, and (4) anti-Thieu, anti-US.¹⁴ Similarly, the US-based pro-PRG Vietnam Resources Center showed its "bias" by mentioning three teenaged girls from prominent Southern families, arrested for activities in the peace movement, as among the Third Force's leaders.¹⁵ The communists, for their part, surmounted their initial wariness of the movement to consider it as an ally in the form of a "third segment," defined as "those persons of different political and religious trends who belong to neither side and who approve of the Paris Agreement" (see Chapters IV and VI).

Finally, there existed a school of thought which, sympathetic to the Front/PRG or not, confined itself to a simple enumeration of the more prominent personalities or organizations associated with the movement, without regard for these personalities' or organizations' political, social or religious affinities. Thus the French journalist Jean Geoffroy described it in 1970 as an urban, neutralist,

¹¹ Pomonti, *op. cit.*, pp. 242, 238.

¹² For example, see Theodore Jacqueney, "Vietnam's Gulag Archipelago," *New York Times*, 17 September 1976; and in rebuttal to Jacqueney's allegations, "Human Rights in Vietnam: A Reply to Theodore Jacqueney" (Indochina Resources Center, Oct. 1976); also Lowell Finley, "The American Debate," *Southeast Asia Chronicle*, nos. 58-59, pp. 33-44.

¹³ Sam Nowmoff, "Why Has Thieu No Intention of Releasing Political Prisoners?" *Vietnam Courier*, September 1973, p. 6.

¹⁴ Hassler, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

¹⁵ "After the Signing of the Paris Agreements: Document on South Vietnam's Political Prisoners," NARMIC/ Vietnam Resources Center publication, June 1973, p. 2.

opposition movement composed of politicians, students, An Quang Buddhists, Catholics, followers of deputy Ngo Cong Duc, war victims' associations, etc.¹⁶ The "committed" American scholar Gareth Porter, likewise lumped together representatives from the military, professionals, politicians, clergy, etc., while stressing their non- or anti-communist backgrounds.¹⁷ Another French leftist, Daniel Hémery, equated the Third Force with "in-betweeners" comprised of independent journalists or deputies, Diemists, heads of old Nationalist (conservative) parties, Buddhist social groups, student leaders, Leftwing Catholics, trade union leaders or academicians "who are not pro-Thieu."¹⁸ Finally, Le Thanh Khoi, Marxist historian and vice-president of the Union of Vietnamese Residents in France, wrote of the "third component" as a heterogeneous assemblage of social classes and political or religious tendencies, where even the Catholic conservatives had a place.¹⁹

Qualifying remarks. -While the catch-all approach is ultimately the most satisfying one given the complexity, ambiguousness and above all no one individual's or faction's monopoly of the term "Third Force," a few qualifying remarks are in order:

1) Whereas the movement was popularly identified with neutralism, no known leader of the Third Force was "neutral" in the sense that he or she, from the very beginning, scrupulously avoided ideological and political alignment with either the NFL or the PRG, on the one hand, or the RVN regime or the United States, on the other. Moreover, with the evolution of the movement in the context of the bigger struggle pitting the First against the Second Forces, there occurred a perceptible polarization of tendencies within the Third Force: one wavered in its commitment to a "third solution" and forfeited its claim to oppose Thieu; the other reaffirmed its militant anti-US, anti-Thieu stand to a degree where it became virtually undistinguishable from the communists' position. The notable exception to this process of polarization, Duong Van Minh, struggled against all odds to maintain a middle course; but his belated attempt to "save" the anti-communist RVN irrevocably cast him in the role of a counter-revolutionary. To the extent therefore that the movement was so divided, it may be said that a genuinely neutral, non-committed Third Force never existed at all, except in the abstract—as an ideal, as it were.

¹⁶ Jean Geoffroy, "Le poids des villes," *Le Nouvel Observateur*, 19 October 1970, p. 29.

¹⁷ Porter, *op. cit.*, p. 246.

¹⁸ Daniel Hémery, "Témoignages sur la répression dans le sud," *Le Monde Diplomatique*, February 1975, p. 35.

¹⁹ Le Thanh Khoi, "Quelle aide pour le Vietnam du Sud?" *Le Monde*, 17 October 1974.

Finally, the only protagonist among the three "forces" to ever formulate a comprehensive standpoint on the matter, the PRG, admitted that the Third Force could work *outside* but *not against* the NFL — which implied, at the very least, non-opposition to the revolutionary movement as the minimum criterion for a Third Force to be considered an ally (see Chapter IV).

2) The socio-economic background of Third Force personalities did not constitute an absolute gauge of their political orientation. As a rule, the most prominent ones came from the South Vietnamese "Establishment." But some of these elites were far from being conservative or reactionary defenders of the *status quo*; those who had undergone prison sentences for political offenses, or had been subjected to other forms of persecution, were especially apt to take a radical stance.

3) The presence of several Buddhist and Catholic lay and clerical leaders in the vanguard of the Third Force does not imply that their respective churches were committed *en bloc* to the movement. In fact, the available evidence suggests that the followers of either religion were to be found in all gradations of the political spectrum.²⁰ Some of the Third Force religious leaders, as pro-American and anti-communist as their avowed enemy Nguyen Van Thieu, objectively belonged to the same "First Force" as the latter.

a. The Buddhists, however, were generally identified with the pacifist aspect of the Third Force in its original concept as a "middle solution." For example, they led the "Struggle Movement" of the early 1960s that claimed to speak for the majority of the Southerners, those caught between the NFL (the PRG was formed only in 1969) and the Diem regime. After succeeding in its move to have Diem ousted, the "Struggle Movement" manifested strong aspirations to become a pacifist Third Force, with US support.²¹ By his own account, Hassler's perception of the nascent Third Force of the mid-1960s was also that it was Buddhist in flavor. But while it condemned the US for its aggression and support for the Ky-Thieu regime, its leaders also tended to depend on the Americans to tilt the balance of forces in favor of the Buddhists.²²

Aside from the search for peace for its own sake, xenophobia apparently played as important a role in shaping the more resolutely "neutralist" Buddhists' opposition to both the RVN governments in power *and* the com-

²⁰ Jean Lacouture, *Vietnam: Between Two Truces* (New York: Vintage, 1966), presents an interesting discussion of the Buddhist's and Catholics' varying political standpoints in the chapter entitled "Churches and Pagodas." For North Vietnamese views of the religious problem, see Nguyen Duc Dan and Phong Hien, "Ideological and Cultural Action," *Vietnamese Studies* no. 31 (1971), pp. 209-221; and Linh Vien, "From Diem to Thieu: Neocolonialist Political Structure and Apparatus," *ibid.*, no. 42 (1976), pp. 48-50.

²¹ Luce and Sommer, *op. cit.*, pp. 136-137.

²² Hassler, *op. cit.*, pp. 208-209.

munists. The same aversion towards the followers of the Roman Church that galvanized the Buddhist majority in Vietnam against the French and their privileged Catholic followers in the 19th century was revived, in the latter half of the 20th century, against those Catholics who held a near-monopoly of State power in the American era, particularly under the Thieu regime. Thus, in contrast and opposition to Catholicism, Buddhism could be projected by its leaders as the representative of "the people," "the nation."²³ Similarly, Marxism-Leninism was shunned by the more conservative Buddhist clergy as another alien element, to be repulsed with equal vigor from the national community.²⁴ This brittle standpoint, more pronounced than among the Catholics, made the Buddhists vulnerable to infiltration by the CIA and communists alike.²⁵

b. Of the Catholics in South Vietnam, it may generally be said that the majority tended, for historical and social reasons, toward a conservative or *attentiste* position.²⁶ The conservative Catholics feared the communists more than they did Nguyen Van Thieu; for his part, Thieu — converted to Catholicism under the Diem regime — turned to his co-religionists and the military to serve as his reliable, if narrow political base.²⁷

Yet, with the degeneration of morality and the senseless carnage brought about by the war, a perceptible change in the Catholics' attitude towards both the Thieu regime and the communists took place in the early 70s.²⁸ Several priests and laymen, acting in an individual capacity, distinguished themselves in legal or semi-legal, and even underground activities undertaken in the name of the Third Force.²⁹ The communists were not unaware of the important role these "nguoì Viet Nam cong giao" (Catholic Vietnamese, with emphasis on their nationality, as distinguished from "nguoì cong giao Viet Nam" or Vietnamese Catholics, with the corresponding stress on their alien religion) could play in the campaign to isolate Thieu.

4) Anti-communist sentiments were not necessarily shared by all personalities identified with the Third Force. In fact, a significant number of them advocated coalition government with the communists through the communist-dominated PRG and, after the communist takeover, they were elected either

²³ Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 323; Linh Vien, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

²⁴ Fitzgerald, *op. cit.*, pp. 381-383; Nguyen Duc Dan *et al.*, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

²⁵ Linh Vien, *op. cit.*; see also Nguyen Duc Dan *et al.*, *op. cit.*

²⁶ Lacouture, *op. cit.*, pp. 102-11. See also Nguyen Khac Vien, "Aggiornamento in the South Vietnamese Catholic Church?" *Vietnam Courier*, January 1973, pp. 16-19; *Indochina Chronicle*, no. 38, pp. 14-16.

²⁷ Allan Goodman, "South Vietnam: Neither War Nor Peace," *Asian Survey* (February 1970), pp. 113-114; Phong Hien and Le Van Hao, "Aspects of Neocolonial Culture," *Vietnamese Studies* no. 42 (1976), pp. 146-149.

²⁸ Phong Hien *et al.*, *op. cit.*, pp. 149-150.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 150. See also Tiziano Terzani, *Giai Phong!* (New York: St Martins Press, 1975), pp. 257-258.

central committee. Some of the movement's most reactionary extremists, at one time or another, expressed their intention to seek a compromise with the communists.

As a corollary, the communists' role in the evolution and "reorientation" of the Third Force idea must be taken into account. As indicated above and, in more detail, in Chapter IV, the communist side elaborated a Third Force strategy and tactics whose sophistication would seem to justify certain observers' allusions to communist manipulation of the movement.³⁰ In this regard, one may pose a number of questions, the answers to which should clarify the concept of the Third Force in all its dimensions: why did the communists ignore the Third Force that was allegedly existing before 1972 in favor of the one whose advent they claimed to perceive in 1972? What difference, if any, was there between "third component" or "third segment" on the one hand and "Third Force" on the other? Why did some skeptics doubt that a Third Force existed at all, and the communists and their sympathizers insist that it not only existed but posed a definite threat to Nguyen Van Thieu?

The Third Force as a united front. - For the purposes of this study, the Third Force that came into being in South Vietnam's cities, especially Saigon, in the context of the Paris Agreement that was expected to impose a political settlement on the war, is apprehended not as a homogenous "force" with all that this word connotes of strength, unity, discipline and capacity to take power, even State power; but rather, as a *heterogenous, "ad hoc" assemblage of representatives of two competing tendencies: a Left wing and a Right wing, each basically in contradiction with the other but conditionally and temporarily allied in a mutually beneficial coalition against a common main enemy.*

This main enemy was Nguyen Van Thieu and his military regime. In the struggle against this common enemy, the Left wing benefited from the Right wing's numbers, influence, its relative freedom from persecution and its alienation from Thieu: the latter found it difficult, for instance, to liquidate a Third Force with so many conservative fellow Catholics in its ranks. The Right wing, in turn, benefited from the Left wing's daring, sense of initiative, unity, organizational skills and discipline: without the Left wing, the Right wing would rapidly have been isolated, left alone to defend a shaky "middle-way" position against a hardliner like Thieu, who tolerated no other anti-communist forces save his own loyal followers.

³⁰ Terzani, *op. cit.*, p. 36, writes of Minh as "a cover that each faction intended to manipulate in its own way at the proper time"; on p. 259, interviews Fr. Nguyen Ngoc Lan, whose concern was "preventing the Third Force from being manipulated." See also Kattenburg, *op. cit.*, p. 119: "Communist influence in bringing the third force into existence or in currently manipulating its activities should not be exaggerated."

Differences between Left and Right wings. - Both Left and Right wings were united on only one point: their opposition to Thieu. But the *nature* of their opposition differed: while the Left wing opposed Thieu because he was considered to be the puppet of the US and the executor of its belligerent, reactionary and repressive policy, the Right wing opposed the same person because he had proven his inability to serve that policy and defeat the communists. While the Right wing's pro-American position did not deter some of its leaders from bitterly criticizing the US, the Americans' continued support for Thieu was the pretext for such criticism (see Chapter VII).

Differences on *intentions* also distinguished one wing from the other: the Left wing intended the Third Force to be no more than a buffer between the PRG and an RVN regime — but one without Thieu or his henchmen — willing to implement the Paris Agreement towards a *de facto* coalition government with Third Force participation; whereas the Right wing aspired to be a real "force," independent of the Left wing and the PRG, while aiming to replace the Thieu regime with or without the Agreement.

Contradictions downplayed. - To be sure, these differences inevitably broke out into mutual recriminations on more than one occasion. But on the whole, the tactical alliance between Left and Right wings during the intense political struggle that underlay the uneasy ceasefire of the post-Paris Agreement period — roughly spanning the 27 months from January 1973 through April 1975 — was characterized by a tacit effort on both sides to relegate contradictions, wherever possible, to a secondary level.

As if by mutual consent, but without formal organizational structures to coordinate their actions, both wings treated each other as secondary enemies during their separate drives to dislodge Thieu — pending the conjuncture of political and military circumstances when each wing would become the main enemy of the other. But precisely because the Right wing was no more than an essentially similar version of the main enemy already on the decline, it was clear that the Left wing held the strategic initiative *vis-à-vis* both the Thieu regime and the Right wing at every step of the tactical alliance.