The American Soldier Is Not A Good Diplomat

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By MIKE McGEE Seventh In A Series

The average Vietnamese doesn't like Americans. At the very best he merely tolerates them.

Vietnam has a strong, well developed culture, characterized by conservatism of thought and passivity of manner. It is a stern and rigid culture; the people have little sense of humor and rarely smile. Curiosity, even intellectual curiosity, is an invasion of privacy.

The Americans are barbarians—literally. They are loud, arrogant, boastful and venal. They are indelicate and not to be trusted. They laugh constantly, tell jokes and criticize everything.

The Vietnamese is proud of his culture. His personal conceit borders on the fanatical. From this well of conceit flows the mainstream of riots and resistance to foreign domination. He insists on being ruled by a hero. An ordinary general or statesman is not good enough.

His prejudice is not limited to Americans. It includes Europeans, Negroes, Indians, and other Asians. The Chinese are filthy, greedy people. Cambodians are lazy. Vietnam is at the center of an ascending Asia culture.

The students in Saigon expressed the other day what I think is the big question being asked all over Vietnam. When are the U. S. troops going to leave? They want the U. S. to state that the troops will leave by some set date. They just want something more than the Johnsonian "When the job is done; when the great plan is fulfilled." We owe them more than generalities.

During the Buddhist riots this spring I asked a Buddhist woman in Saigon what the problem was. She was very definite. "At the Honolulu conference Ky sold Vietnam to the United States for a period of 8 years."

Two weeks after Ky returned from Honolulu big headlines appeared in the local papers: "Ky announced no more poor people in two years." Straight out of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. Ky certainly can't do that. But maybe father Lyndon can. (So goes one of the arguments.)

Most individual U. S. soldiers (there are many who don't fit this picture) feel that the Vietnamese should show them deference "ince they are "risking their lives to save him from Communism." It's easy to feel superior to him, for he is small and quiet, and underprivileged. Endearing terms for him are "Slope" and "Gook." Suprisingly enough, even Negro soldiers express their contempt for these people.

Many soldiers express the attitude that since they're all Viet Cong anyway, we might as well treat them as such. American soldiers don't make good diplomats.

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