



Associated Press

The Mekong Delta: After nine years of war, 'a state of total insecurity' in two key provinces

South Vietnam: The Break-Even Point

The men gathered around the horseshoe-shaped table at Marine headquarters, situated high on a bluff overlooking Pearl Harbor, listened intently to the reports from the battlefield. They studied 140 maps and charts of South Vietnam, and reviewed in detail the situation in each of the 43 provinces. They heard U.S. Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge analyze political developments since a junta of Vietnamese generals overthrew the regime of President Ngo Dinh Diem (NEWSWEEK, Nov. 11), and they were given the military picture by Gen. Paul D. Harkins, chief U.S. military adviser in Vietnam. At the end of the one-day meeting they issued a 2,000-word communiqué which said in effect that the nine-year-old war had taken a turn for the better, and that the future seemed to hold "an encouraging outlook."

Among those at the conference were Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara, and Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It was the first high-level review of the war in Vietnam since Diem's overthrow, and so comforting were the reports that the delegates were able to confirm that nearly 1,000 of the 16,500 U.S. servicemen stationed in Vietnam would be withdrawn by the end of the year.

Tossup: The same optimism was not reflected in dispatches from Vietnam where gradually the full extent of the damage caused by Diem's aloof, despotic rule was being revealed. NEWSWEEK's Beverly Deepe reported from Saigon that despite the fact that more than 30,000 Viet Cong were killed last year, the Viet Cong's hard-core strength had grown to 30,000 through local recruitment and infiltration; and that in

recent Communist attacks on strategic hamlets and government outposts there had been a "sizable and significant" increase in the number of government militia who ran away or defected rather than fight. "We are now at the break-even point between winning and losing," said one U.S. military adviser. "At best we are winning the war more slowly than a year ago . . . but the war can still be lost. We can win every military engagement in the field but still lose the political war. It is a tossup with even money on both sides."

Enemy Strength: The situation was most critical in the Mekong Delta, the rice bowl which harbors about 10 per cent of South Vietnam's 15 million population. Here, Viet Cong battalions were appearing in ever-increasing force, armed with heavy weapons. And in the two key provinces of Long An and Dinh Tuong, there was what one U.S. official described as "a state of total insecurity." Out of a total of 432 strategic hamlets in the two provinces, only 20 per cent of them were considered politically and militarily viable.

The situation was even worse in the Camau peninsula, the southernmost tip of Vietnam, where government troops were hardly able to hold their own. There the Viet Cong ruled the countryside, exacted taxes from the villagers, and blew up bridges at will. "This is the end of the line," said one disgusted U.S. observer. "We're overextended and all we can do is defend ourselves. Almost every night people we know get killed. Every night it's the same."

In Washington, Pentagon officials admitted that the situation was bad in the Mekong Delta and Camau Province, but said that the strategic plan was to

compress the guerrillas from the north into these two areas which would then become a killing ground. "Over-all, the news really is encouraging," one American official insisted.

Beheaded: What seemed to support this theory was the surrender last week of some 700 Hoa Hao guerrillas who had been fighting Diem since 1956 when the leader of their sect, a quasi-religious organization with its own army, was publicly beheaded. The guerrillas came out of the jungle and said they now wanted to fight the Communists. At the same time, the junta removed 31 high-ranking military officers, all associated with the Diem regime, from their posts, and sent them on indefinite leave without pay.

Perhaps the week's most significant development, though, was a little-publicized announcement that France had extended its commercial agreement with Communist North Vietnam for another year. There were even reports that President Charles de Gaulle was considering establishing diplomatic relations with Ho Chi Minh's regime in order to further his declared aim of a neutralist solution to the Vietnamese war. Both the junta and the United States Government are implacably opposed to such a plan.

But as events in neighboring Cambodia were showing, de Gaulle's efforts to re-establish French influence in its former Indochinese empire could no longer be dismissed as a piece of Gallic whimsy. The people of South Vietnam were growing increasingly tired of a war that seemed endless; and Ho Chi Minh, eager to lay hands on the agricultural riches of the south without invoking Chinese intervention, might well em-

brace neutralism as a means to an end. Unless the U.S. and the junta could quickly make up the ground lost by Diem, there was a real possibility that proposals for a neutralist solution, almost certain to lead to an eventual Communist take-over of South Vietnam, would gain force and momentum.

Whose Hour?

He blows a hot saxophone. He is fond of fast cars and black knit ties. He plays good games of soccer and basketball. He is also pudgy and goes on crash diets that make him irritable. And last week mercurial Prince Norodom Sihanouk, ruler of Cambodia, a part of the former French colony of Indochina, was on another of his diets and very disgruntled.

The 41-year-old leader was obsessed with the idea that the CIA was trying to get rid of him, the "same way as it did with Diem." The reasoning was clear—at least to Sihanouk. For several years, a group of Cambodian rebels who call themselves the Khmer-Serai have been urging Sihanouk's overthrow over clandestine radio stations which Sihanouk charges are located in U.S.-supported Thailand and South Vietnam. Although Washington disclaimed responsibility for the stations, Sihanouk remained unconvinced.

To show just how unconvinced he was, Sihanouk decided to call a mass rally. Before 20,000 cheering and shouting Cambodians, he paraded two captured Khmer-Serai members who eagerly confessed to making some of the clandestine broadcasts from a South Vietnamese hamlet controlled by the CIA. Then, in his high-pitched voice, Sihanouk dramatically asked: "Must we accept aid from this government which gives to us with one hand and with the other stabs us in the back? If my children are in agreement let them throw up their hands." His obedient "children" gave an instant roar of approval. "So be it," said Sihanouk. "I thank my children."

Unstable? With that, the Prince haughtily notified Washington that its cultural, economic, and military aid (totaling \$365 million since 1955) was no longer needed in Cambodia. The U.S. Government, which is interested in Missouri-size Cambodia only because of its strategic location between Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam, was more puzzled than upset. But the pro-Western Thais were not puzzled at all. Thailand's Foreign Minister Nhieki Tioulong said: "Sihanouk is not mentally stable. He is selling his country to Communist China." And from Peking, in fact, came prompt pledges of "all-out support" if Cambodia "should encounter armed invasion instigated by the U.S. ..."

But it seemed doubtful that Sihanouk would ever call upon Red China to redeem its pledge. Though he has played up to Peking because he fears China's "inevitable victory" in Southeast Asia, Sihanouk's avowed creed is "positive neutralism"—which, in practice, seems to mean avoiding the embrace of any power close enough or strong enough to threaten Cambodia's freedom of action. True to this principle, the Prince last week followed up his blast at the U.S. with the announcement that there was one source from which he would be happy to accept technical and military



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Sihanouk: A winning game?

aid. "There remains," he said, "the France of General de Gaulle which no one could accuse of practicing imperialistic policies here ... This could be the hour of France."

JAPAN:

Ballots and Boom

Barely 71 per cent of Japan's 60 million eligible voters bothered to vote in last week's Japanese election, but the results were never in doubt. Everyone knew that Premier Hayato Ikeda, architect of Japan's current boom, would win. The only question was: how big? If Ikeda's Liberal Democrats got a two-thirds majority in the Diet, they could amend the constitution to permit serious Japanese rearmament.

As it turned out, the Socialists, Japan's chief opposition party, wound up with 144 seats, far short of their avowed goal of 180. The Liberal Democrats came away with 283 seats, a comfortable majority but not enough to enable them to put through any constitutional amendments. Ikeda's only mandate: keep prosperity booming.

WESTERN EUROPE:

Strictly Protocol

The reception ceremony was carried out with faultless punctilio. When West German Chancellor Ludwig Erhard's train slid into the Gare de l'Est in Paris last week, Premier Georges Pompidou was on hand to meet it. At the Elysée Palace, the Garde Républicaine snapped to the salute, their sabers bright and shining. Then a smiling President Charles de Gaulle shook Erhard warmly by the hand, and led him off for two days of talks which a communiqué later described as full of "cordiality, friendship, and confidence."

Observers of diplomatic niceties noted, however, that in the days of Konrad Adenauer, de Gaulle himself had traveled out to meet the Chancellor. The fact that this time de Gaulle had adhered strictly to protocol and sent Pompidou in his place signified a new era in Franco-German relations.

Erhard, too, made this clear when he told French newsmen that although he valued the Franco-German treaty of cooperation, engineered by Adenauer, "we Germans are convinced that we can and must rely on the Atlantic alliance." This ran counter to de Gaulle's view that Europe should be strong enough to defend itself, and should seek to lessen its dependence on the United States by acquiring its own nuclear striking power.

Nevertheless, Erhard's open frankness seemed to have paid off in some areas. Although the final communiqué made it clear that no detailed agreements had been reached, it spoke of:

► Agreement on the questions of German reunification and Berlin, where last week the Soviets rejected a U.S. protest over the halting of a U.S. convoy on the autobahn (NEWSWEEK, Oct. 21). Both Erhard and de Gaulle believe in a firm policy toward Soviet encroachments.

► A determination to achieve a settlement of the Franco-German wrangle over common European grain prices within the Dec. 31 time limit laid down by the Common Market. The French, who fear inflation, want to keep grain prices low; Germany's inefficient farmers are trying to keep prices high.

► A joint acknowledgment of the need to facilitate trade between the Common Market and other nations—"in particular the United States and member countries of the European free trade zone"—which somewhat improved the omens for next year's tariff talks in Geneva.

All in all, Erhard seemed to have achieved his main purpose which was "to balance our close commitments to the U.S. against the separatist inclinations of our friends in France."

The second leg of Chancellor Er-