

Johnson's Man for Vietnam

The appointment of Mr. Robert Komer as "special assistant to the President for peaceful reconstruction in Vietnam" was announced by Mr. Johnson with an abruptness and amid secrecy that have now become habitual in those matters. The White House staff had no inkling in advance, and had confidently expected Mr. Komer to succeed Mr. McGeorge Bundy as special assistant for national security affairs; one source had him already in charge of Mr. Bundy's office.

The significance of Mr. Komer's appointment is that he is an old Central Intelligence Agency hand: he worked for the CIA for fourteen years. The CIA trains and finances the 25,000 Vietnamese (the number is about to be doubled) who make up the "political action teams" entrusted with "pacifying" Vietnamese villages that have been wrested from the control of the Vietcong.

Mr. Komer has been told to go on a reconnoitring mission (postponed on Tuesday because of the Buddhist riots) to Vietnam, accompanied by Mr. Bill Moyers, the President's press secretary who has now handed over his routine work to his recently appointed deputy in order to free himself for more significant assignments. Mr. Moyers was once very active in the Peace Corps, and "pacification," "peaceful reconstruction" or "revolutionary development"—the three titles are used interchangeably to describe the same process—is an odd mixture of CIA methods and Peace Corps aspirations. Thus, the CIA-trained "political action teams" (their Vietnamese boss is General Nguyen Duc Thang) consists mainly of very tough characters, war-hardened and fiercely anti-communist, whose task is to "root out the communist infrastructure" in districts where the Saigon government has regained the upper hand. The rooting-out is likely to require interrogations, denunciations, perhaps political trials followed by executions. It is no secret in Saigon that this has already happened in many villages (which nevertheless have by no means all remained "secure" following those purgatives) and that both the political action teams and the CIA have been involved in such happenings.

But "pacification" has another side, which is the one that President Johnson prefers to stress. The Secretary of Agriculture, Mr. Freeman, and the Secretary of Education, Mr. Gardner, have visited Vietnam accompanied by their experts who have drawn up tentative plans for reorganising the life of South Vietnamese villages. The plans are supposed to come up for final review and endorsement in June and presumably Mr. Komer will keep an eye on them thereafter on behalf of the President.

The Administration hopes to persuade whatever government is installed in Saigon, military or civilian, to introduce in regained districts such land reforms as a low ceiling (much lower than the present 100 hectares) on land occupation (but not ownership). For their own use, landowners are to be asked to be content with three to five hectares and the remainder of their land they will be expected to let out at low (and controlled) rents. All farmers are to be supplied with seed, credit, fertiliser and expert advice. Roads and bridges are to be built, plus schools and medical clinics. A sort of Jeffersonian rural democracy is to be established in South Vietnam as the American-sponsored answer to communist land-seizures and Vietcong rule.

Mr. Komer, still more Mr. Moyers, may find themselves being torn between the punitive and the remedial aspects of "pacification." But the Komer appointment indicates that Vietnam remains Mr. Johnson's single overwhelming preoccupation:

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he recently complained bitterly to the French ambassador: "Why does General de Gaulle give me this Nato headache when he knows I'm bleeding at every fingernail with Vietnam?"

CIA or what-have-you footnote. Some American officers in the Hué region claim that the Buddhist activity there against the government of Air Marshal Ky has been encouraged by American undercover men (agency unspecified). It could be: the Administration wanted Ky to "democratise" his government faster than his own inclinations seemed likely to lead him. But would the Americans risk playing Frankenstein?

China's World Trade

Latest estimates of China's trade in 1965 show a considerable upward movement over the previous year. They are also somewhat higher than the figure FOREIGN REPORT suggested two months ago (see our issue of January 6th).

Hongkong observers now offer the following (in \$ million):

Exports: about \$2,050 million	
of which: agricultural products	800
industrial raw materials	400
textiles, clothing	525
others	325
Imports: about \$1,750 million	
of which: grain	400
other food	130
non-food agricultural	150
(mainly rubber, cotton)	
fertiliser	140
industrial raw materials	490
machinery, equipment	330
(including vehicles)	
others	110

Notable in these crude figures is the sharp increase in imports of fertiliser (possibly doubled compared with 1964) and of iron and steel products which may have taken \$130 million (up by 50 per cent over 1964) of the quota of industrial materials. Grain continued to account for a major share of China's trade with the non-communist world, and is expected to go on doing so: continuing purchases in the range of \$300 to \$500 million a year are expected, though grain will certainly be less significant proportionately in the total trade. For the current grain year (ending in July) 6.5 million tons have been contracted for, as high a level as ever.

The most significant unknown about China's trade last year is what happened to its trade with the Soviet Union, now that all China's debts have been paid off. In 1964 this amounted to a total of \$450 million: exports were \$314 million, imports \$136 million. A correspondent recently in Hongkong found an expectation there that it would at most have declined marginally, and might actually have increased. One American estimate suggests that while Chinese exports might have stayed around the \$300 million mark, the Chinese would have felt able to increase their buying to perhaps \$200 million.

From: Foreign Report pp. 5-6; 31 March, 1966

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