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Life's Many Sides

Mr. Reston's thesis

By TON THAT THIEN

In a recent interview, Mr James Reston, the military analyst of the NEW YORK TIMES said some interesting things, some of which make sense, and some do not.

Mr Reston was right when he said that the battle of Asia would last till the end of the century, and that Vietnam was not the end, but only the beginning of it. This is an admirable vision of history Mr Reston could even stretch his view further both in space and time and say that the present battle is not only a battle of Asia but of the world, a global battle, if we like this word so dear to Mr. George Bidault and that it would last beyond the year 2,000. He could also stretch his view backward and say that the present battle started in 1917 when the first big nation came under the control of a government which made communism at home, and communisation abroad, its aim. As far as Asia is concerned, the real battle started in 1949 with the victory of Mao in China.

Viewed in military-political terms, the present battle in Vietnam has a historical precedent: the Pacific war from 1941 to 1945. First, the weakening of the West's position in Asia as a consequence of its engagement in Europe; then the invasion of North Indochina by Japan, viewed with cliste by the United States; next the occupation of South Indochina by the Japanese forces, followed by the United States efforts to eject them by diplomacy, and when this failed by war.

In terms of ideology, it was a battle between the idea of Greater Eastern Co-Prosperity Sphere and «self determination.» Today, the ideological struggle is one between communism and freedom. One can see that there will be no end to this battle until one of the contestants has been defeated, or at least, as in Korea, until it has been proved that victory is too expensive.

But many Vietnamese, and perhaps foreigners too will surely disagree with Mr Reston on the second point, namely that the United States should limit the war by holding only Saigon and the coastal areas. This is the idea adopted a century and a half ago by the West in its dealing with China, and which bears the name of «gunboat diplomacy» and «international settlement». Asia was then disorganised and militarily week but today, not to say anything about the Chinese giant, even North Vietnam is a military factor of importance. In addition, there is the strategy of protracted warfare, of the isolation of the cities by the occupation of the countryside, and the arming and preparing of the rural population for the assault on the cities. In this respect alone, Mr. Reston's idea is inapplicable. The defense of the coastal areas is in the Highlands, that of Saigon in the Zone D. (if we consider only the military side of the matter): that is why the American Command has correctly put its men in An Khe, Bien Hoa, and Di An.

The real arguments against Mr. Reston's thesis, from the Vietnamese point of view, however, are economic and psychological. What will the Vietnamese in the coastal areas and Saigon live on if the countryside — where the food and the means of paying for Vietnam's imports are produced — is left under the absolute control of the Vietcong? Of course they can be maintained by the U.S. and other nations. This would mean beggarism for the Vietnamese males, and prostitution for the Vietnamese females. Well, the least one could say is that beggars and