

Byrd's Eye View
A Public Service Column by
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ELECTION UNCERTAINTY

Americans already attuned to our national election day, set for early November, may well pause to assess the significance of the political drama currently unfolding in South Viet Nam, and to consider the relationship of the September 11 election in that war-crippled country to our own coming fall elections.

Many, in examining the circumstances prevailing in Southeast Asia, may well wonder whether they can be favorable to the successful election of an assembly to draw up a Constitution (hopefully leading to the establishment of a new government, honorable alike to its founders and advantageous to our National interests, which, because we have taken up arms in defense of the South Vietnamese, are closely involved). They point out that South Viet Nam is reduced to miserable economic conditions, without a working system of laws, without a corps of leaders of recognizable authority, pillaged, torn between brutally antagonistic religious sects, partially ensalved by fellow Vietnamese from the north, and menaced by foreign powers. They point out that terrorism will be brought to bear by the Viet Cong throughout the countryside to prevent honest vote-casting, and that any election returns will be suspect, if, indeed, effective voting can even take place.

They emphasize the vulnerability and political naivete of the vast majority of inhabitants subject to voter registration; and they assert that, should the election produce results considered compatible with American interests, the Communists will make international political hay by claiming intimidation by armed South Vietnamese troops aided and driven on by "imperialistic" American military might.

To other Americans, however, it appears that there never was a period more appropriate for the execution of so important an undertaking.

They say that justice is on the side of the beleaguered South Vietnamese, who have proved their longing for a national identity, and that such a cause is a just one. They say that if, indeed, the South Vietnamese are willing to regulate their own national conduct in the pattern set by other Republics, and so to take another step forward in delivering their country from the rule of foreigners, it is necessary, above all things that they reach an accord and that they launch their own national enterprise. They point out that in every locale the people must go to their communal centers, voice their wishes, name their representatives, delegate power in the name of their nation, and so have an opportunity to act, in equality, under one national banner. They believe the South Vietnamese faith in a national destiny must manifest itself in an immense impulse of concord against the present tremendous odds and, if so manifested, will provide a vital base for survival as a national entity.

It is obvious that the September election in South Viet Nam represents a gamble. Whether it is a magnificent one, or a doomed one, the future will reveal. But the fact of an election in South Vietnam at this point in history is an arresting one. Its outcome may well have significant effects upon our own November elections and upon the future conduct of the war in Viet Nam.

If a relatively strong and unified government should ultimately evolve from this initial step (election of a constitutional assembly) -- a government which could attract the loyal support of the South Vietnamese people in thwarting Communist efforts to gain control of the country, this would be a welcome eventuality in that it could shorten the war and lessen American involvement in that area.