

# Land "Reform" in Vietnam

by SYDNEY MAYERS

WHY do so many of South Vietnam's farmers, who comprise the bulk of its population, docilely accept the Vietcong when these "invaders" seize their villages? Because when the Vietcong come in, the landowners go out, and with the latter's departure the payment of rent abruptly terminates. A few anti-Communist heads may roll, but when this order of business is completed, the propaganda mill starts turning, spreading promises of land-distribution, an end to landlordism, and heaps of rice in every peasant's bowl.

Vistas of a Red paradise make an appealing prospect, and the paddyworkers are oblivious to the dubious *bona fides* of President Ho's minions. A simple choice seems to exist: to pay rent or to be relieved of this heavy burden. They have seen, all too often, that when villages are retaken from the Vietcong, on the heels of the "liberators" come the impatient rent-collectors.

A well trained observer, the late Bernard Fall, stated the case with succinct eloquence: "... the large mass of landless peasants stands to lose a great deal the day Saigon re-establishes control over the countryside and thus restores the old tenant-landlord relationship, as invariably happened in the past whenever government troops re-occupied a given area."

Pity the poor Vietnamese! Their choice is about as free as that offered by the notorious Mr. Hobson: "freedom" under a totalitarian dictatorship, or "freedom" to pay rent to landlords who exact from a third to more than half of the value of the crops produced by backbreaking labor. The extent of the landowners' "take" can be discerned in The Wall Street Journal's

report that, of the 1,176,000 farm-operating families in the rice-growing Mekong Delta, only 257,000 own all the land they farm.

However, there is (is there?) a gleam of hope. Prodded by the U. S. State Department, which is alarmed by the lack of popular support for South Vietnam's present administration, the National Assembly is to consider a proposal for land reform. In essence, it provides that each tenant farmer will be given title to the land he is working. As to the bereft landowner, the "reform" provides that the government will reimburse him for his "lost" land, and will in turn be reimbursed by its new owner. Further, since it will take several years to effect the proposed change-over, it is contemplated that during that time the government will pay the landlord the rent the tenant would otherwise have paid him! This is called "land reform."

For all the current fanfare, such so-called land reform is not a new concept. Exactly 120 years ago, John Stuart Mill wrote: "The land of any country belongs to the people of that country. The individuals called landowners have no right in morality and justice to anything but the rent, or compensation for its salable value." Henry George's reaction to Mill's strange statement was delightfully scathing: "In the name of the Prophet—figs! If the land of any country belong to the people of that country, what right, in morality and justice, have the individuals named landowners to the rent? If the land belong to the people, why in the name of morality and justice should the people pay its salable value for their own?"

So said George in 1879. What more can be said today?