IT IS SURELY a sign of the times, and one that gives ground for the greatest satisfaction, that a major Australian political figure should be occupying himself with serious and sympathetic study of the revolutionary history of an Asian society. One has only to reckon the improbability of such a thing happening 20 or 30 years ago to measure something of the shift in the centre of gravity of Australian political life which has taken place over those years and is continuing at an accelerated rate.

Already Dr. J. F. Cairns' latest book*, has been greeted with howls of rage by such spokesmen for the far Right as Mr. Geoffrey Fairbairn and the leaders of the D.L.P. Indeed, the editors of the DLP journal Focus thought they were carrying off a political masterstroke when they published on the front page of a recent issue a photograph of Mr. Whitlam and Dr. Cairns together at the launching of the book in Melbourne before Xmas. The mere fact that the Labor Leader associated himself with the occasion was seen by these pundits as new and particularly telling evidence that the Labor Party is still, as for so many years past, going to the dogs.

For his part, Mr. Fairbairn, in a review in the Sydney Morning Herald, took violent exxxception to Dr. Cairns' closely argued point that the Vietnamese liberation forces only resorted to armed struggle after systematic repression by the Diem regime had


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rendered peaceful political forms of action impossible. It is essential to the case of such men as Mr. Fairbairn, who never say boo about such things as B-52 saturation raids on the South Vietnam countryside or the massacre at My Lai, to hold that the “communists” are always and everywhere the initiators of violence. But such reactions really serve only as negative confirmation of the significance of Cairns’ work.

The Eagle and the Lotus moves at several levels. It provides first of all a bird’s eye view of the history of French intervention in Vietnam. One could wish that Dr. Cairns had found a slightly less grand formulation than “Western Intervention in Vietnam 1847-1968” for his sub-title, since he devotes only 27 pages to the entire period of French colonisation up to Vietnam’s August revolution of 1945. The section on United States intervention in the post-Geneva period is, understandably perhaps, much more substantial. Indeed, the 60-odd pages of the chapter (The Unwinnable War) on the course of the conflict from 1962 to 1968 could probably have done with some pruning. It is here particularly that the mass of material at the author’s disposal seems to get away from him to some extent, and here that he could lose all but the most determined of readers.

But the essential points are strongly made in these sections of the book — the continuity of the Vietnamese independence struggle from the earliest days of the French incursion into Vietnam until the present, the indigenous character of the movement both to Vietnam as a whole in the past, and to South rather than to North Vietnam in today’s circumstances.

Dr. Cairns’ close study of American sources is of extreme value, enabling him to analyse with great penetration the mainsprings of American policy at the given stages — the fateful 1962 shift from the long-standing American appraisal of the Vietnam situation as a civil war situation to the “external aggression” thesis, the overriding necessity of saving the Saigon regime from overthrow which lay behind the escalation of the war (introduction of US combat troops, launching of the bombing of North Vietnam) in 1965, and the decision taken in the latter half of 1967 that a military victory was beyond reach. The author emphasises that the Tet offensive of early 1968 confirmed rather than precipitated this decision.

In my view, Dr. Cairns’ study of the Vietnam war becomes controversial only when it is a question of analysing the contending political forces in South Vietnamese society. The “eagle” of his title is, of course, Western interference in the life of the Vietnamese nation over the past 120 years. His
"lotus" may be described as the native civilisation of Vietnam, but, more particularly, it is that "third force" in Vietnamese political life which stands between those who are waging the armed liberation struggle and those who have made themselves the agents of foreign intervention in Vietnamese society.

It is the "third force" that Dr. Cairns would like to see as decisive in Vietnamese affairs. It is my view that through political sympathy and association (especially with such "third force" leaders as the Buddhist bonze Thich Nhat Hanh, who visited Australia some time ago and whose ideas have influenced Dr. Cairns strongly) the author tends to overdraw the significance of this force, and its possible role had there not been massive US military intervention in Vietnam.

I would be the last to deny the role that the "third force" is certain to play in the inevitable eventual political settlement in South Vietnam. Any student of the statements of the National Liberation Front and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam knows that they share such an approach. One has only to mention the importance attached by them to the recently formed National Alliance of Democratic and Peace-loving Forces, which probably represents the most Left elements of South Vietnam's "third force" and which, surprisingly, is not mentioned by Dr. Cairns, and the attention they give to the "third force" political exiles from South Vietnam living in such places as Paris and Bangkok, to realise this.

On the other side, the fearful, repressive attitude adopted by the Thieu regime in Saigon to any manifestation of third force initiative reflects the same reality.

But the "third force" role will be played in a context basically determined by the course of the struggle between the liberation forces and the invaders and those Vietnamese who have thrown in their lot with them. Its action will in effect merely set the seal upon a situation which is already basically formed. I suppose it can be said with some degree of validity that all political struggle, whether within a political party or in society at large, is designed to win the support of "third forces" — those who inhabit the "middle ground" of politics, the "uncommitted", the "centre", the "swinging voters", and so on. The South Vietnamese political scene is no exception to this rule. But to reason from this ground that the third force is a decisive force is surely to put the cart before the horse. For such a force can only be "decisive" post festum, as Karl Marx was fond of saying — after the event, after the military and political centention of the opposing forces has established the outlines of the new political balance.
All this is not to deny some power of independent initiative to the third force — the examples of third force, mainly Buddhist, action in Hue, Saigon and Da Nang cited by Dr. Cairns did precipitate change, but only in circumstances substantially predetermined for it by the actions of the chief actors in the Vietnamese drama. So, no doubt, it will be in the future as well. Third force leaders like General Duong Van Minh will never play a really decisive role in a nation which has already produced its Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap.

It must be said that Dr. Cairns expresses extreme doubt as to whether his third force will in fact prevail in South Vietnam. He says (p. 195): “Does such a third force (rejecting the NLF but also opposing present Saigon policies) exist in South Vietnam? There can be no doubt that South Vietnam did possess such a third force but American policy has weakened and reduced it. . .”

His main complaint against the Americans, in terms of Vietnamese political life, is precisely that their brutal intervention “weakened and reduced” the third force. His doubt about the future of this force is not surprising because a good part of the book is devoted to an elaboration of the depth and breadth of the struggle of the NLF, in which the role of the Vietnamese communists is, generally speaking highly appraised.

In a certain sense he answers many of his own arguments when he says (p 209): “It (communism) was, in fact, more appropriate to the needs of Vietnam than any other doctrine and in respect to the struggle for national independence and economic and political reform the communists in Vietnam had the best record”. Dr. Cairns’ discussion of the Vietnamese communists’ role, and their maintenance of an independent stance (“their own soul”) in the disputes dividing the world communist movement, is particularly perceptive.

But here again, his account of the flexible and creative way in which they have behaved in this context takes much of the sting out of his repeated warnings (p. 198) of the dangers posed by “dogmatic and relentless communists” in the Vietnam of the future. But the book has a wider canvas than Vietnam. Dr. Cairns is also concerned with the problem of revolutionary war in general. In this context he sees Vietnam (correctly I think) as at the same time unique and in the highest degree typical.

He firmly underlines the primacy of politics in revolutionary war and the fact that for success revolutionary combatants must be firmly rooted in the social context in which they fight. Both conditions he sees as fully applying in the struggle in South Vietnam.
One of the most valuable aspects of the book is its emphasis on the need for structural changes in the countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. He writes (p. 218):

Economic development is not primarily an economic process. It is a political and social process which leads to economic results... Land reform is needed in economically under-developed countries; lower rents are needed, and lower interest charges, and higher wages. Are land owners likely to lead a campaign for land distribution and for the lowering of rents? Are money lenders likely to lead a campaign for lower interest charges? Are employers likely to lead a campaign for higher wages? Hence, economic development becomes associated with taking from one class and giving to another...

The book also contains an extensive discussion of United States policy up to and including the Nixon Doctrine for new forms of intervention in Asia, a critical appraisal of the developing Soviet presence in the region, and a discussion of the future course of Australian foreign policy.

In this last connection he emphasises, once again, as he did with force in his earlier work, Living With Asia, the essential connection between any movement towards an independent foreign policy and internal change within Australia. Such remarks as "we can help social progress elsewhere only if we have some of it in America and Australia" (p. 237), are taking on the quality of vintage Cairns. And again: "... we must free ourselves from conventional submissiveness in foreign policy — we must cease to be military camp followers — if we are to have a chance of building a better society in Australia" (Introduction, p. xi).

He deals severely with the secretive operation by which a succession of Liberal governments have integrated Australia, through allowing the establishment of US bases on our soil, in the US nuclear system (with no safeguarding anti-ballistic missile), and makes the most forthright call I have yet seen from his pen for a "Fortress Australia" approach to questions of national defence.

It is hardly to be expected that one of Australia's hardest-working politicians should find time to produce a full-length study of any given subject without signs of haste and pressure creeping into the text now and again. This certainly happens with The Eagle and the Lotus. But when all is said, it remains a thoughtful and humane contribution to the Australian discussion of Vietnam and international relations in general. It is a worthy continuation of its author's years-long effort to expose the crime committed in our name through the Vietnam intervention, and to change the line of Australian foreign policy in the direction of national independence and peace.