

We have of course felt from the beginning that it is in the interests of the Vietnamese Government to cooperate fully with the American press and we have so advised them. We have not been completely satisfied with the Vietnamese handling of press and information. They are, in this area as in many others, short of experienced and trained people. They lack the facilities and personnel for a full and free flow of information from all parts of their country. They are a newly independent nation laboring under the handicaps of a terrorist war, underdevelopment, and 2,000 years of authoritarian traditions—these factors do not make it easy for them to understand the free American press.

I might just note in this connection that we haven't been too long in understanding this. Woodrow Wilson was the first American President to hold a press conference, and Franklin D. Roosevelt was the first to hold them regularly. So it has taken us a while to develop mutually responsible relations between press and Government ourselves.

Given all their problems, it is only fair to say, however, that there has been a distinct improvement in the facilities which the Vietnamese have made available to the American press in recent months. They are holding more press conferences and generally doing a better job of making information available to the press.

For example, they recently held a press conference on herbicide operations in South Vietnam. Correspondents were given all the facts, including maps showing the areas involved, information on the chemical products used, and the strategic advantages of these programs. American correspondents who were present thought that it was a thorough and most helpful presentation.

Our Military Assistance Command Vietnam Public Information Officer and our public affairs officer from USIA work closely with the Vietnamese Director General of Information and Vietnamese Department of Defense in accrediting correspondents and providing facilities. Largely as a result of our suggestions, the Vietnamese Directorate General of Information initiated in December of last year a daily press briefing in both English and Vietnamese.

This is a new undertaking for the Vietnamese and they have not yet had time to build up the technical competence to which foreign newsmen are accustomed. Frequently their information has become "stale" before it is given to the reporters. The Government of Vietnam is not completely comfortable with this new institution and it will require time for them to build up confidence and competence in this area.

On our side, the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, holds a briefing on military developments daily. The Embassy does not hold scheduled briefings, but the Ambassador and other senior officials make themselves available as often as possible to reporters who request appointments—a procedure which the correspondents have indicated they prefer. To the best of my knowledge, there is no lack of access to American officials for newsmen.

Let me interpolate that I have, myself, twice gone to Vietnam, at the direction of the President, and on both occasions part of my instructions was to gather together the newsmen in Saigon and to talk to them about their problems there. I have come back in every instance with some ideas as to how we can help them better, and these ideas have been put into effect.