

How to talk to Mr. Ho



Ho Chi Minh has a long past as a negotiator. Twice, in 1946 and 1954, he succeeded in concluding political settlements with the West; and if these accords have not been more fruitful, it is in large part because the Communist negotiators have been tricked and cheated by the defenders of the “free world.”

Whether Ho Chi Minh and the ruling group in Hanoi are prepared to negotiate a compromise settlement of the [continued]

by Jean Lacouture

Illustration by Dugald Stermer

Vietnamese war is not clear. Indications from Hanoi are contradictory. But Hanoi is one of the principals in any negotiated settlement with the West. Its experience in two previous sorties to the conference table goes a long way toward explaining the Vietnamese wariness and mistrust of the Western powers. But these precedents are also a source of hope; people who have acted in the past with such prudence and political sense are capable, once again, of approaching the green felt table in a spirit of moderation.

[MR. HO AND THE FRENCHMEN: 1946]

August 1945, Ho Chi Minh returned from southern China with his men, and on September 2 proclaimed the independence of the Vietnamese Republic at Hanoi. His party, the Viet Minh (a popular front but Communist dominated), controlled what is now North Vietnam as well as Hué, capital of the center, and dominated the Quang Ngai region. In Saigon too, the Viet Minh appeared as the principal revolutionary force, but here the situation was fluid. The French had been chased out by the Japanese, the Japanese had capitulated and the English were maintaining a semblance of order (a role the Chinese "Nationalists" were performing rather badly at Hanoi). But three weeks later the French forces reappeared, with English complicity, in the South. From all appearances it was an operation of reconquest.

The Viet Minh had snatched power in the North with an audacity and a tactical genius worthy of Lenin. But this power was fragile. The anticommunist nationalist parties represented in Ho's government were a constant threat, and the Chinese troops of the Kuomintang supported them openly against the "reds."

Since 1943 the Americans had been giving some friendly support to the revolutionary movement of Mr. Ho. But after the death of Roosevelt and the Japanese surrender, the United States was less inclined to help this bothersome wartime ally, and began to give in to French pressure in the name of "Western solidarity." The Russians were too far away to be much help to Ho, and the Chinese Communists had their hands full just surviving.

August 22, the French mission was re-established in Hanoi, with Jean Sainteny, veteran of the French Resistance, in charge. Five days later Vo Nguyen Giap, then the Viet Minh interior minister, paid him a visit to establish contact. Preliminary talks began on October 15 with a meeting between Ho Chi Minh and Sainteny. The Frenchman spoke of "autonomy" within the French Union. (What *that* was, no one knew exactly—perhaps a vague sort of Commonwealth; General de Gaulle preferred to posit its existence rather than define it.) The Vietnamese demanded recognition of the independence pro-

claimed in September—after which an agreement might be reached permitting the temporary return of French forces and recognition of a special relationship with Paris.

February 16, 1946, Ho Chi Minh informed Sainteny that he was ready to accept North Vietnam's entry into the French Union ("Is it round?" said Ho, laughing. "Is it square?"). On the 26th he issued a communique announcing the opening of "official negotiations" with France. On the 28th, the government of Chiang Kai-shek recognized the "principle" of French sovereignty over Indochina and agreed to withdraw its troops from North Vietnam. The following day I was received by Ho Chi Minh; he gave the impression that agreement was near. March 6, after the tough final hours of negotiation, Ho Chi Minh and Sainteny signed an accord by which Ho agreed:

- a. that no mention of "independence" would figure in the text of the accord.
- b. that Nam-bô (the southernmost part of Vietnam, formerly known as Cochin China) would be incorporated in the new state only if the population chose to do so by referendum.
- c. that French troops would be stationed in the North for five years, but that fighting in the South was to cease.

In exchange, France recognized Vietnam as a "free state having its own government, its parliament and its finances, forming part of the Indochinese Federation and the French Union." The ink was hardly dry on the paper when Ho turned to Sainteny and said, "I have misgivings. You know that I wanted more than that. But one cannot have it all in a single day." Then he embraced Sainteny, adding, "Friendship is my only consolation." Turning to us, the journalists, half-laughing, half-crying, he proposed a toast to the health of the new state.

Could Ho have avoided these concessions? Paul Mus, the sociologist who was then advisor to the French negotiators, has written in *Vietnam, Sociologie d'une Guerre*: "In reaching agreement with France, Ho wanted to strengthen his position against a possible Franco-Chinese *entente* based on the recently signed Chungking conventions (recognizing French sovereignty over Indochina), which had not even mentioned the Hanoi government. If the French and Nationalist Chinese were to make such an alliance, the Viet Minh would have been crushed in the vise . . ."

But if the Ho-Sainteny accord appears remarkable today for the Viet Minh's concessions, international opinion at the time, particularly in the English press, considered it a decisive step in the liberation of Asian peoples. India and Indonesia would have to wait long months before their independence was recognized. And though Vietnam was only a "free state," Ho Chi Minh knew how

to make his militants understand that a little patience was better than a lot of spilt blood.

The Franco-Vietnamese accord was not to last more than nine months, and the fault can be laid principally to the French representative in Saigon, Admiral d'Argenlieu. The day after Ho Chi Minh's departure for France, in company with a delegation charged with negotiating the formal treaty between Paris and Hanoi, the admiral ordered the proclamation of an "Autonomous Republic of Cochinchina" (June 1, 1946). It was, the French authorities assured us, a mere temporary measure, "while awaiting the referendum" provided by the accords of March 6th. But Ho Chi Minh had the impression that he had been tricked. And the treaty he brought with him, on his return from France in September, was hardly more than a vague *modus vivendi*, a warmed over version of the fragile accords of March.

From week to week, relations between Paris and Hanoi turned more and more sour. On November 18, an incident between Vietnamese customs inspectors and French soldiers at Haiphong touched off a bloody gunfight, and several Frenchmen were killed. The French fleet, anchored in the harbor, retaliated by firing on Vietnamese positions, killing thousands of people in a nearby residential quarter. A high-ranking French officer rubbed salt in the wound by boasting of "giving a good lesson" to the Vietnamese.

The politics of "accords" does not stand up long to this kind of "good lesson." A month later, General Giap got his revenge by launching a surprise attack on the French garrison in Hanoi, which had been installed in March after the accords. The French returned fire, the battle widened. Before long, it was a war. Ho and Giap took to the *maquis* to lead an all-out struggle against the French.

The March 6th accords were sabotaged by the ultras in Paris and Hanoi. But they showed also that Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh leadership preferred to obtain their objectives by way of negotiation—provided their interlocutors were negotiating seriously and in good faith. In March of 1946 Ho Chi Minh had taken the risks of moderation. He lost the gamble. He did not, however, lose all his illusions about the possibility of negotiating with the "colonialists" and "imperialists."

[MR. HO AND THE BIG FIVE: 1954]

1953: Seven years had passed. An implacable war, which the chiefs of the Viet Minh had lived out in the *maquis*, suffering like the soldiers. General Giap had put together an army (with the aid, since 1950, of the Chinese) which had already inflicted serious defeats on the French forces—at Cao-Bang, Lang-Son, That-Ke. The military equilibrium, re-established by the Viet Minh since 1950,

weighed slightly in its favor by the end of 1953. There was even hope of total victory over the former colonizer, although there were external factors which militated against it. Peking and Moscow had just put an end to the war in Korea, and Washington, under pressure from Paris, seemed on the verge of escalating from mere technical support for the French Indochina forces, to direct intervention.

November 25, 1953, the Swedish newspaper *Expressen* published an interview with Ho Chi Minh in which the Viet Minh leader was quoted as saying: "If the French government desires to conclude an armistice and resolve the question of Vietnam by negotiations, the people and the government of the Republic of Vietnam are ready to examine the French proposals."

In Paris, officials were skeptical. "One does not practice diplomacy in the classified ads," remarked Georges Bidault, the French foreign minister (who several weeks later would try to prevent a socialist deputy, Alain Savary, from making contact with Ho Chi Minh, telling him, "The Viet Minh is exhausted. Your visit will only bolster their courage and strengthen them"—the same kind of language Dean Rusk was to employ 12 years later). But the French public was so weary of this war—a war with few victories, still less moral justification and no apparent exit—that the idea of negotiation grew more and more appealing. And that is why, at the Berlin conference in February 1954, Bidault himself, encouraged by his British colleague Anthony Eden, convinced the Big Two, Dulles and Molotov, to include the Indochina problem on the agenda of the conference scheduled to open at Geneva in the spring. The Geneva meeting, called originally to settle the Korean question, would feature the participation of People's China.

We should recall here, because of its relevance to the events of 1966, that the objective which Bidault (and perhaps also Dulles) had in mind when he plumped for an international negotiation on Indochina was essentially to persuade Peking to abandon the Viet Minh. In the French minister's view, Ho Chi Minh's forces would not be able to hold on without Chinese support: deprived of this crutch, the Viet Minh would crumble. The French diplomatic corps liked to compare Ho Chi Minh to Markos, the Greek Communist leader who was obliged to capitulate after Marshal Tito withdrew his support. Bidault spoke of winning a similar concession from the Chinese by offering them "bon bons"—capital equipment, perhaps, or diplomatic recognition, or admission of Peking to the United Nations. One cannot fail to be struck by the parallel between Mr. Bidault's conception of Peking pulling the strings for the Viet Minh, and Mr. Rusk's conception of the Viet Cong as the marionette of Hanoi.

Chou En-lai arrived at the Geneva rendez-vous (April 1954) without having received any “bon bons” from Paris. Immediately the conferees confronted the problem of Viet Minh representation. The “nationalist” government of Saigon, headed by playboy Bao Dai, did everything to prevent its Communist adversary from being represented (as the junta of Marshal Ky is doing today). But even John Foster Dulles rejected this pretention, and after a week of discussion the delegation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam—headed by Pham Van Dong, the present prime minister—was recognized as one of the nine principals at the conference. The others were the United States, the USSR, Great Britain, People’s China, France, Cambodia, Laos and “nationalist” Vietnam.

The Indochina conference formally opened on May 7, 1954, the very day the French were decisively defeated at Dien Bien Phu in a battle the French strategists had counted on to “break” the divisions of General Giap. A month earlier in Washington, President Eisenhower, with the approval of Senate Majority Leader William Knowland and Minority Leader Lyndon Johnson, had refused to intervene militarily to save the French garrison. The French thus came to Geneva, having absorbed a serious defeat on the ground and not being able to count on American intervention, in a decidedly weak position. It remained to be seen if the Communists would take advantage and impose on France humiliating and intolerable conditions.

The Viet Minh could not fail to be intoxicated by the prospect of victory. And they were encouraged by the statements emanating at the time from Washington. On April 29, for example, President Eisenhower announced that Washington would take no initiative in the Indochinese situation, in the hope that an “acceptable *modus vivendi*” with the Communists would be reached at Geneva. On May 12 John Foster Dulles himself declared: “Southeast Asia could be held without Indochina . . .”

THE DECISIVE PROPOSAL, however, came from the Viet Minh delegation, headed by Ho’s closest and most faithful lieutenant, Pham Van Dong. And that proposal was the temporary partition of Vietnam. The idea was not entirely new; it had been outlined in the English press on May 3, taken up several days later by the influential French newspaper *Le Monde* and by Walter Lippman, and advocated privately by the chief of the American delegation, General Walter Bedell Smith. What was surprising was that this idea, discreetly formulated in the camp of the losers, had been taken up officially by the side of the winners.

Agreement came swiftly. On May 25 in open session, Pham Van Dong spoke, in rather ambiguous fashion, of

fixing sector boundaries preparatory to a cease-fire, of an “exchange of territory” and if possible, the establishment of “single-tenant zones.” One member of the French delegation, Claude Cheysson (presently ambassador to Indonesia) murmured, stupefied: “It’s partition—and it’s *they* who are offering it!” The essential point, given the French “commitment” to Bao Dai in Saigon, was that this solution, judged inevitable by serious observers, had been proposed by the other side.

Then on June 8, during a secret meeting of the French and Viet Minh military delegations, Ta Quang Buu, representing the People’s Army, pointed to a map of the northern zone of Indochina and said to French Colonel de Brébisson: “We must have a state; we must have a capital; we must have a port.” When the Frenchman, fascinated, inquired about the dimensions of this zone, his interlocutor responded vaguely, recalling only the importance his government attached to the city of Hué. If he was proposing a partition at the 14th or 15th parallel, it was not clear. But the negotiation had been launched, and once again by the Viet Minh.

To measure properly the moderation shown by Ho Chi Minh and his representatives at Geneva, barely a month after Dien Bien Phu, we should recall that the Viet Minh was not only dominant in the North, but controlled more than half the territory of the center, almost half of the Southern territories and much of Laos. It is easy to understand, therefore, the extreme interest of the Western camp in this extraordinary proposal of the Viet Minh. Bidault’s lieutenant at Geneva, Frédéric-Dupont, hurried to Paris to announce the news, hoping at the same time to save the Laniel government, which had been accused by the majority in parliament of bungling the Geneva negotiations. But Georges Bidault preferred to see the government fall (which it did six days later) than to attach too much importance to the Viet Minh offer.

The new premier, Pierre Mendès-France, was to win new and important concessions from the Viet Minh. The first concerned the location of the line of partition. Ho Chi Minh had suggested, after the June 8 meeting, the partition of his country at the 13th parallel. The Westerners fought toe to toe on this point, and as the negotiations progressed, the demarcation line was moved to the 14th parallel; then, on the initiative of Chou En-lai, to the 16th, and finally on the last day, to the present frontier at the 17th parallel. The Communist leaders had thus ceded not only one-fifth of the territory they had sought to obtain, but a third of the land they occupied militarily and a population of more than 2,000,000 people.

But territory was not all that the Viet Minh conceded. They also gave considerably more than an inch on the question of the date of the referendum which was to unite

the two zones of Vietnam. The Viet Minh demanded six months; the French, three years. Anthony Eden and Molotov, co-chairmen of the conference, convinced the parties to compromise at two years. And what is more, Pham Van Dong had to agree beforehand to evacuate Viet Minh troops unconditionally from Cambodia and Laos, at best a one-way arrangement. France was given the right to maintain bases in these two countries, with Vientiane and Phnom Penh having the right to call on their "allies" in case of "danger." It was not exactly what one would call a neutralization of Laos and Cambodia.

Why, then, did the conquerors of Dien Bien Phu make such extensive concessions? One reason was the pressure from their Communist allies, the Soviet Union and China—this was two years before the first rumblings of the Sino-Soviet split—who at the time were encouraging an international *détente*. The Russians did not wish, by humiliating France, to force her into supporting the rearmament of Germany. The Chinese, after Pan Mun Jom, wished to concentrate on economic development at home. Moscow and Peking decided, moreover, that if the Geneva negotiations failed the war would resume, and that Washington, despite its evasive statements of March-May of 1954, would end by intervening directly in Indochina, with a concomitant threat to the Chinese revolution.

But it would be a mistake to attribute Ho's moderate attitude solely to exterior considerations. Ho, while accepting the use of violence as a revolutionary necessity, has shown that he knows also how to use it selectively and to balance the cost in human lives against the results to be gained from fighting. When Pham Van Dong received a group of journalists on July 22, 1954, he did not give the impression of a man whose allies had forced him to absorb concessions of which he disapproved. He viewed the accords rather as a clever compromise, useful to all concerned. Perhaps Ho Chi Minh felt that prolonging the war would mean an increase of Chinese influence over the Viet Minh. Just as in 1946 he had preferred independence "on time," so in 1954 he was willing to accept reunification "on time."

Once again the West tried to snatch the fruits of victory from the Viet Minh revolutionaries, and once again Mr. Ho, the moderate, reacted fiercely to the Western betrayal. In 1946, Admiral d'Argenlieu and his headquarters in Saigon had refused to recognize fully the results of the Hanoi negotiations between Ho, General Leclerc and Sainteny; by creating the *fait accompli* of the "Republic of Cochin China," he had sabotaged the prospects of the referendum provided for in the March 6 accord. In 1954, John Foster Dulles refused to concede fully the implications of the Geneva Accords. Deciding that the provisional demarcation line at the 17th parallel was henceforth the

permanent frontier of the "free world" in Asia, he encouraged Ngo Dinh Diem to refuse the referendum planned for July 1956.

In both cases, an eminent spokesman for the West had swindled the Communists. And if the Vietnamese reaction was severe after 1946, it could not fail to be so after 1956.

[MR. HO AND THE UNITED STATES: 1966]

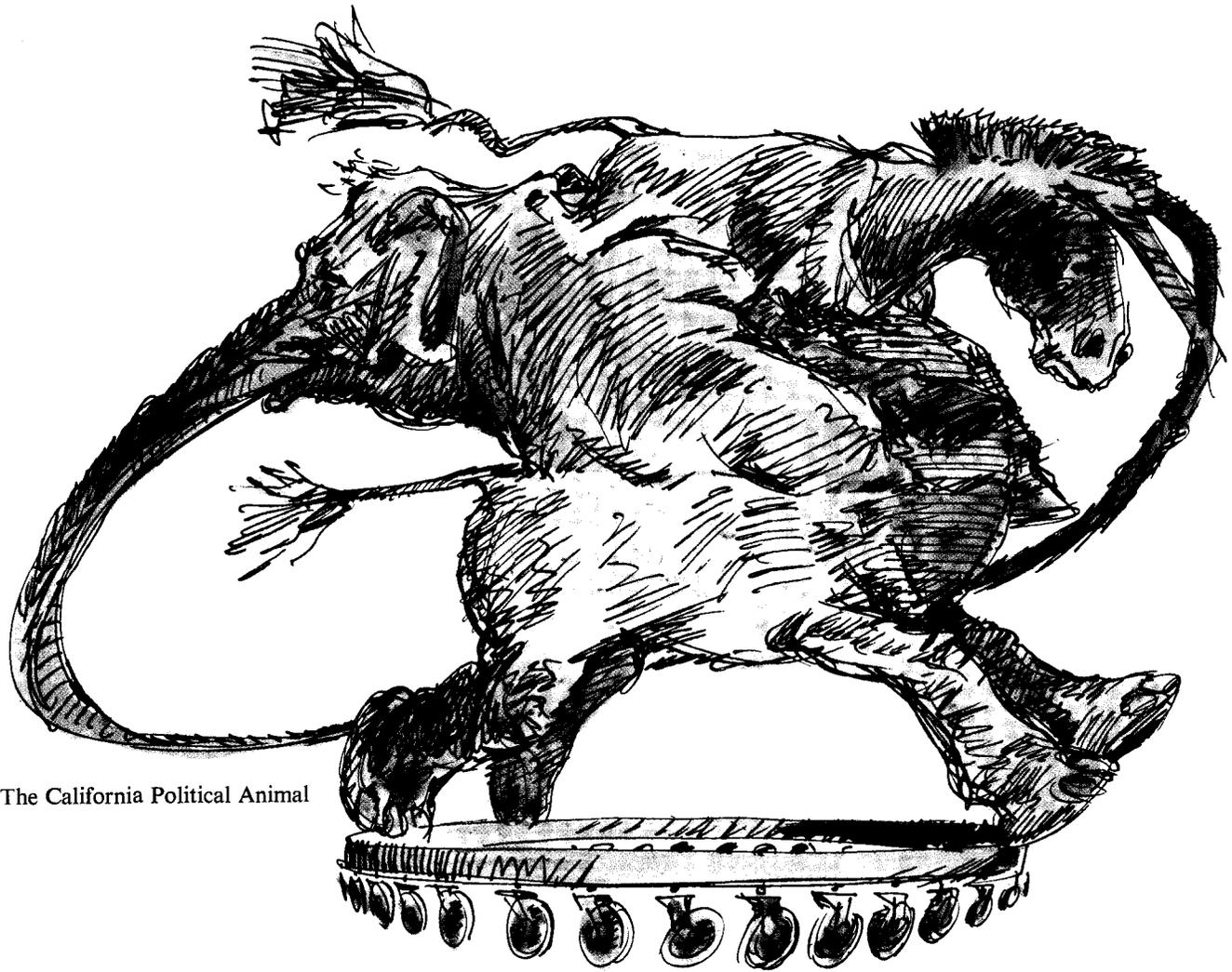
IN THE LIGHT of these two vignettes of history, we are faced with the question: Can Ho Chi Minh and his party be persuaded to attempt a third experience of negotiation and compromise with the West?

Before replying to that question, we should observe that Ho Chi Minh is no longer in the position that he occupied in 1946 and 1954. He is no longer the main protagonist of the conflict. Today it is the "Viet Cong" which occupies the place of the Viet Minh of 12 and 20 years ago. Today Mr. Ho is as tangential to the fight of the NLF as Mao Tse-tung was to Ho's war in 1954. Washington's attempt to force Hanoi to "let go" of the Viet Cong is slightly less fantastic than the analogous policy tried in 1954 by Bidault, who hoped that withdrawal of Chinese support would suffice to finish the Viet Minh. But in another sense, Rusk is even more unrealistic, because Peking was freer in 1954 to "let go" of Ho Chi Minh than Ho is today to "let go" of the NLF.

One must constantly keep in mind that each of America's adversaries—the NLF, Hanoi, Peking—has its own interests and objectives. No solution is possible unless:

- a. the Viet Cong obtains, by political means, the influence over public life in the South warranted by their sacrifices, their organization and mass popular following.
- b. Hanoi is convinced that there is a good chance of a negotiated reunification of Vietnam (within five or 10 years), guaranteed evacuation of U.S. forces within a reasonable period (perhaps two or three years), and an opportunity to maintain its independence vis-a-vis China.
- c. Peking can count on a neutralization of Southeast Asia, or at the very least of Indochina.

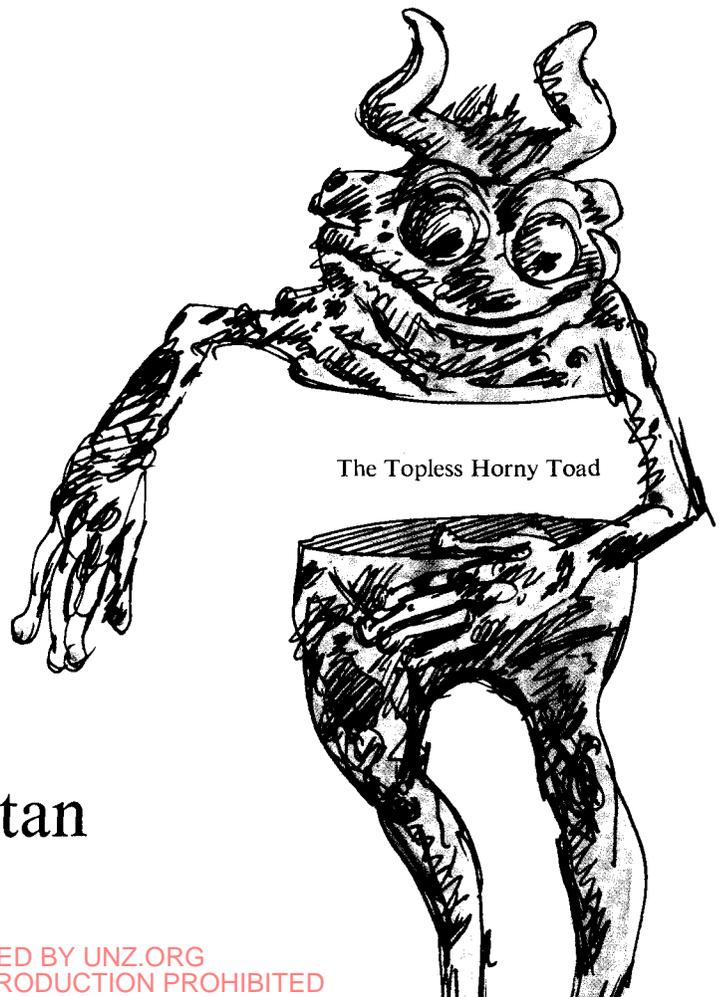
When Washington solemnly agrees to self-determination in the South, to the right of the NLF to play a role corresponding to its influence, to the possibility of a not-too-distant reunification; when Washington announces it will evacuate Indochina, support neutralization and show the seriousness of its intentions by concrete gestures—cessation of bombing, North and South, "freeze" of operations, contacts at a suitable level with each of the interlocutors—then we might have grounds for hope that the leaders of North Vietnam would rediscover the spirit of compromise which animated them in 1946 and 1954.



The California Political Animal

The California Natural History Guidebook

compiled by Gene Holtan



The Topless Horny Toad