

*Inventamus Si Progressimus: “We Made It Up as We Went Along”*  
The Evolution of the American Advisory Effort in South Vietnam

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation examines the efforts of the South Vietnamese government along with their American military and civilian advisors to devise and implement programs to combat the Viet Cong Infrastructure in South Vietnam prior to the assassination of President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963. This dissertation will focus on both the Agrovillage and Strategic Hamlet Programs examining their organization, construction, and goals and the Viet Cong response to counter their implementation. It examines how the South Vietnamese with assistance from the United States military and Central Intelligence Agency under Presidents Dwight D. Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy conducted armed nation-building from 1955–63 on an unprecedented scale. This dissertation argues that the Viet Cong Infrastructure was so pervasive, and their control of the peasants using terror so systematic, that the price in time, treasure, and especially blood was more than either the South Vietnamese or their American allies were willing to pay to overcome.

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As for this dissertation, I alone am responsible for the interpretations and conclusions presented as well as for any errors that may appear.

## Epigraph

It is not given to human beings, happily for them, for otherwise, life would be intolerable, to foresee or to predict to any large extent the unfolding course of events. In one phase men seem to have been right; in another, they seem to have been wrong. Then again, a few years later, when the perspective of time has lengthened, all stand in a different setting. There is a new proportion. There is another scale of values.

Winston Churchill

Should I become President . . . I will not risk American lives . . . by permitting any other nation to drag us into the wrong war at the wrong place at the wrong time through an unwise commitment that is unwise militarily, unnecessary to our security and unsupported by our allies.

John F. Kennedy

Everything depends on the Americans. If they want to make war for 20 years then we shall make war for 20 years. If they want to make peace, we shall make peace and invite them to tea afterwards.

Ho Chi Minh

We . . . didn't know about the redoubtable nature of the North Vietnamese regime. We didn't know what steadfast, stubborn, dedicated people they were. Their willingness to absorb losses compared with ours wasn't even in the same ballpark.

Gen. William DePuy

A democracy cannot fight a Seven Year's War.

Gen. George C. Marshall



## Preface

I start with what this dissertation is not—neither a definitive history of the Vietnam War nor a description of how the war was fought; both have been done by several famous scholars and authors who have devoted decades of research and study to the subject. Nor have I written an apologia or indictment, neither a celebration of “ignominious defeat” nor a lament about it.

Whatever I have written, thought, or felt in the past about America's problems with war and peace has converged on the theme of the nature and meaning of our military failure(s) in Vietnam, or in Iraq and Afghanistan. No American service member who participated in any of those three wars can pretend to view the consequences of those failures with complete emotional detachment. Looking back, I believe the best you can do to achieve perspective is to strive for a certain emotional distance from your subject. When the subject is your own nation and its institutions, it is hard to keep the distance. Your hopes and fears for America manage to show through and color the analysis.

My studies have confirmed to me that those wars of choice provided abundant evidence of good men, with good intentions, who struggled and lived with the decisions they made, men groping for answers in the quiet of the night. But I have also found that the decisions of all too many of our political and military leaders were based on ignorance. Others believed all means, no matter how brutal, are justified in the pursuit of American political goals. A lack of political, and more importantly, moral courage prevented not a few from revising mistaken decisions even after they had recognized them as such. Worst of all, there were also those who did not hesitate consciously to deceive the American people about those three wars in order not to lose political support at home.

Obviously, any work about America's reaction to the fact of our military failure in Vietnam (or Iraq and Afghanistan) at a time when it was still a matter of public debate is bound to be interpreted within the frame of concern, and the question will be asked what is this dissertation “for” or “against”?

I love my country, but it is no service to it, or to its people, to gloss over the rough facts of the consequences of our mistakes. If there are some consequences I have not confronted, it has not been through lack of diligence or realism, but because I have tried to focus on the most important ones and their related aspects. In dealing with something as provocative and demoralizing as failure, it is easy to get thrown off track by the transient and miss the enduring and significant.

I will state for the record that I do not believe for a second that our ultimate failure in Vietnam (nor Iraq or Afghanistan) was due to either avarice or malignant intent. The men who made the tough decisions after 1945 inherited a set of assumptions rising out of the tragedies of Hitler, World War II, Stalin, Mao, and the other twentieth-century totalitarians.

Over the last forty years, prominent scholars have challenged what came to be called the “Munich Analogy” so widely offered by a long line of United States presidents and others who defended their post-World War II foreign policy. They have noted significant differences between Munich and the later events, which Washington officials used to justify their interventionist practices. But they largely missed the most important point, which our post-war presidents and their supporters could not ignore. Perhaps had the free world developed the strength, unity, and will to defend freedom in Czechoslovakia and elsewhere; it could have stopped Hitler long before he became a menace to world peace and, therefore, saved more than sixty million lives. The lesson of Munich, so our leadership believed, was: Never again should

free men let down their guard, lack the intelligence to see danger ahead, or fail to accept the hard duties that that knowledge imposed. Instead, they should pay the price of eternal vigilance and build the strength to defend their liberties. The critical mistake was made when free men failed to establish through the League of Nations, or some other way, an effective collective security against all alterations of the Treaty of Versailles (except by negotiation) and all violations of world peace. That failure, aided by a divisive, ignorant, and stubborn nationalism, released violence and destruction upon the world and denied to any agency the necessary role of policeman of the peace, so bitterly and tragically won in 1918. Nor frankly, did it matter that Czechoslovakia was more homogeneous, technically advanced, or better governed than Vietnam or Korea. The latter two peoples had as much right to seek freedom as did Czechoslovakia.

To be fair, there may have indeed been many differences between Munich and the later events in Vietnam. The opponents of the Munich analogy loved to cite them, but there was one important identical factor in both: the dangerous force of aggressive authoritarianism, which sought to expand against its neighbors and subvert systems counter to its will. Vast Soviet seizures along their bloodstained western rim lands; the Communist takeovers in Cuba, China, North Vietnam, North Korea, and elsewhere; the incursions into North Africa, South America, and the Near East aroused little or no fears in them. While Communist totalitarianism marched on, they expressed little concern; termed efforts to contain it as reactionary capitalist meddling; and gave the impression that resistance against it was worse than the conquest. In 1938, it was able to do so for lack of sufficient strength and will to resist. Since 1945, aggression has been halted in a few spots without the need for a great world war, but only because the United States paid the price other nations were unwilling to pay.

In the years following the Vietnam War, those who rejected the Munich analogy offered no adequate solutions to aggression or for internal subversive grabs backed by the Communists. They expressed little fear of the ideological challenge. They suggested no concern that it be defeated. They offered no viable option but coexistence or acquiescence. They equated America's resistance to such aggression as imperialism. They seemed unable to see a powerful force on the march against freedom over the globe.

Our fears may have been exaggerated. Even dictatorships and all socialist states at that time had their own problems and suffered setbacks. In the space of my lifetime, events revealed that nationalism had more appeal than socialism for the world proletariat. Tito, Mao, Castro, and others were first nationalists and only secondarily Communists and hardly Communists at all if that meant accepting guidance from Moscow or any outside leadership. As of the writing of this dissertation, nationalism is still a more powerful force than Communism or internationalism.

At the risk of torturing Søren Kierkegaard's metaphor, life truly can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards. Mankind stumbles forward as best it can from crisis to crisis, and the historian faces the burden of describing and explaining what was, not what ought to have been.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Hindsight is corrupting and distorting and pays no respect to the way life is really lived—forwards, generally blindly, full of accidents, fortunes, and misfortunes, patternless, and often adrift. Easy in hindsight to say we would beat Napoleon at Waterloo: only by a whisker, according to the honest general who did it. Easy to say we would win the Second World War: ask those who watched the dogfights of the Battle of Britain in Kent in 1940. Easy to say the Berlin Wall was bound to fall. Which influential commentator or body of opinion said so in the 1980s? Hindsight is the easy way to mop up the mess which we call history; it is too often the refuge of the tidy-minded, making neat patterns when the dust has settled. As often as not, when the dust was flying, no one at the time knew what the outcome might be.<sup>1</sup>

*Melvyn Bragg*  
*British Broadcaster*

It is often said that war, virtually any war, raises a number of questions that often remain unanswered long after the fighting has ended. The Vietnam War was no exception. Despite the efforts of some revisionist historians to reinterpret the meaning of the Vietnam War as but one piece of a larger Third World War against the Communist powers (1917–91), we did lose that war.<sup>2</sup> Our repeatedly stated objective from the very beginning of our involvement was to preserve South Vietnam as an “independent, non-communist state,” which we were unable to achieve.<sup>3</sup>

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1. Melvyn Bragg, *The Adventure of English: The Biography of a Language* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2003).

2. Michael Lind, *The Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (Simon and Schuster, 2002). The Cold War, according to Lind, was actually the Third World War of the 20th century, and the proxy wars in Korea, Vietnam, and Afghanistan were its major campaigns. America fought the war in Vietnam because of geopolitics and forfeited the war because of domestic politics. To Lind, the ultimate responsibility lay with neither the new civilian policy elite nor the American press, but with the US military establishment, which failed to adapt to the demands of what before 1968 had been largely a guerrilla war. In Lind's interpretation of the conduct of the war, the high costs of the military command's misguided approach in American and Vietnamese lives sapped the support of the American people for the nation's commitment to Indochina. The ill will engendered by the war undermined US public support for the Cold War on all fronts.

3. Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), ix.

This dissertation is specifically concerned with the efforts of American service personnel assigned by the US government to act as advisors to the South Vietnamese government and military to establish effective control in South Vietnam's rural areas, how successful they were in accomplishing those objectives, and how their actions influenced the enemy. A review of US Army advisory programs in the Vietnam War provides a framework for analysis and will help to illustrate the human factors, events, and considerations, which fundamentally changed American objectives from a historical culture of mass armies and the use of attrition to one of decentralized, small-scale interactions with the population.

United States military involvement in Vietnam began on July 26, 1950, when President Harry Truman authorized \$15 million in military aid to the French. It is from this point that American military advisors began to accompany the flow of US tanks, planes, artillery, and other supplies to Vietnam. Over the next four years, the US spent three billion dollars on the French war and by 1954 provided eighty percent of all war supplies used by the French. Later that same year, the US established a Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) in Saigon to coordinate both material and financial aid to the French.

While this dissertation focuses on a specific military effort to advise and support an Allied nation in time of war, the goal of this thesis is to examine the dynamics of these individual programs that shared common goals throughout the Vietnam War. Analysis of each of these programs and the various factors affecting them will lead to greater insight into their success or failure. Of related and critical significance are the political-social problems which develop between the US government and the Government of Vietnam (South). Accurate information and reporting is needed not only on the enemy, but also on the host government because corruption, resource

allocation, and diminished popular support are usually the factors which force the host country to request the aid of the United States in the first place.

In order to trace the origins of the US Army's long, and frequently unhappy, involvement in Vietnam from 1955 to the end of the Kennedy administration in context, this dissertation describes at some length the evolution of the US advisory effort toward Vietnam as well. Beginning in 1950, the US was drawn haphazardly into a confusing and ill-defined mission to assist first the French in their effort to retain their position in Vietnam and then, in fits and starts, the South Vietnamese in their struggle to establish a free, independent, non-Communist country able to defend itself. Seemingly making it up as they went, multiple US governmental agencies conducted poorly coordinated efforts to help the South Vietnamese. Untethered to any in-country command structure, these agencies reported on their efforts directly to their parent organizations in Washington, DC. Agencies in many cases were competing against each other for influence and wasting precious resources.<sup>4</sup> The focus of this dissertation is an examination of those American military and civilian personnel tasked by the US government to act as advisors to their South Vietnamese counterparts. Those seeking a comprehensive history of US-Vietnam relations, the political development of North and South Vietnam, or the international and legal ramifications of the wars in Vietnam may refer to the many excellent works on those subjects cited in the footnotes and the bibliographical pages of this work. While this dissertation does not cover all aspects of American policy toward Vietnam, the reader will find that this examination of the activities of those Americans tasked to work with their South Vietnamese counterparts will shed considerable light on that policy. The Vietnam War has left a legacy of controversy concerning most major American actions and decisions as well as those of our enemies and allies. There is no expectation that the conclusions

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4. Thomas W. Scoville, *Reorganizing for Pacification Support* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1982), 3.

reached in this account will meet with universal agreement on the part of former participants in, and students of, the conflict. The author believes that the efforts of those tasked to advise the South Vietnamese are described fairly, accurately, and without bias toward any particular organization or individual.



Courtesy of Army University Press

Figure 1. Vietnam and its neighbors.



The United States' lack of understanding of Vietnam was a core problem. It led to the collection of a vast amount of war data collected on seemingly every facet of life. The American industrial method in making war dictated that constructed ratios, such as kill ratios, rice production ratios, or personnel force ratios vies-a-vie the enemy, would result in victory or would at least provide Americans an answer to the question "Are we winning?" American leaders assumed that it could achieve its political goal, pacification of the Vietnamese population, through military mean, and its progress could be measured in concrete figures.

In a broad sense, a critical flaw existed in evaluating the success or failure of pacification programs during the war, pacification was defined as:

The military, political, economic and social process of establishing or re-establishing local government responsive to and involving the participation of the people. It includes the provision of sustained, credible territorial security, the destruction of the enemy's underground government, the assertion or re-assertion of political control and involvement of the people in government, and the initiation of economic and social activity capable of self-sustenance and expansion. The economic element of pacification includes the opening of roads and waterways and the maintenance of lines of communication important to economic and military activity.<sup>5</sup>

The problem with this definition is obvious: Success in war occurs when the nation's political goals are achieved, not by the number of enemy units destroyed, roads opened, schools built, or food delivered. America's purpose for involvement in South Vietnam was to ensure the viability of a stable, democratic South Vietnam able to withstand external and internal coercion. Operational success in support of a population, while humane, does not necessarily ensure the

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5. "1968 Pacification Planning: Definition of Terms," Memorandum to Corps DEPCORDS, Austin, TX, Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Komer-Leonhart Files, Box 17, 1967.

achievement of strategic or political objectives. Defining the objective improperly creates handicaps before the war has even begun. The historical record shows that insurgencies can be just as brutal as conventional military engagements between opposing conventional armies.

Due to the fluid nature of insurgency and counterinsurgency warfare, American advisors involved in both main force combat and pacification missions were forced to modify their efforts numerous times during the war. First, the expectation of the wildly optimistic idea of “nation-building,” whose goal was the eventual transformation of South Vietnam into a model of democracy for Southeast Asia, was constantly reevaluated—usually downward. After nation building proved too difficult, next came the “hearts and minds” phase of winning over the population, which then led to the simpler concepts of “population control” and “village security.” These last two efforts were essentially military concepts, declared to be absolute “musts” in a counterinsurgency war. Needless to say, all efforts had corresponding metrics, carefully collected and implemented with an Americanized viewpoint held by the era’s prominent think tanks, which subsequently showed the successes and failures of US and South Vietnamese efforts. Leaders in Washington chose freely which studies to believe based on their own personal feelings or political outlook.

The rationale for American involvement was not South Vietnam in and of itself as it had no strategic value to the US. The central issue, as it had been in Korea and later in Iraq and Afghanistan, was armed aggression and the demonstration of American credibility. To abandon South Vietnam to an army trained and supplied by the Soviet Union and the People’s Republic of China was seen by the American foreign policy establishment as the most dangerous form of appeasement.

Many in Washington, having lived through the appeasement of the Fascists in Germany and Italy and the militarists in Japan believed strongly that abandoning South Vietnam would only encourage Communist adventurism. Additionally, it would have sent a shock wave through a still recovering Japan and other countries in Southeast Asia that had strong left-wing and even avowed Communist movements within their populations. Malaysia and the Philippines had only recently successfully suppressed internal Communist insurgents and if America abandoned South Vietnam, those it Washington believed it would only have encouraged those movements to regroup and try again. By contesting Communist moves in South Vietnam, the US reinforced the notion that it would counter Communist aggression or subversion in those countries allied to the US and thus providing a protective umbrella that gave a breathing space for economic recovery. Frances FitzGerald in *Fire in the Lake the Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*, identifies three distinct grounds for misunderstanding and miscommunication between Vietnamese and Americans: the incongruity of their aims; American ignorance of Vietnamese problems; and the disparity of Vietnamese and American frames of reference for giving meaning to general concepts such as freedom, democracy, and national problems. As a result of these grounds for misunderstanding, both peoples necessarily had gross misperceptions of the other's aims, motives, viewpoints, and expectations. FitzGerald sums up her theme:

The unknowns made the whole enterprise, from the most rational and tough-minded point of view, risky in the extreme. In going into Vietnam, the United States was not only transposing itself into a different epoch of history; it was entering a world qualitatively different from its own. Culturally as geographically, Vietnam lays half a world away from the United States.

Many Americans in Vietnam learned to speak Vietnamese, but the language gave no more than a hint of the basic intellectual grammar that lay beneath. In a sense there was no more correspondence between the two worlds than that between the atmosphere of the earth and that of the sea. . . . To find the common ground that existed between them, both Americans and Vietnamese would have to recreate the whole world of the other, the whole intellectual landscape.”<sup>6</sup>

Even during the Vietnam War, some perceptive observers recognized the incompatibility of US goals and its methods of pursuing them in Vietnam. Even while defending the American presence in Vietnam, Henry Kissinger observed:

“What had gone wrong? The basic problem has been conceptual: the tendency to apply traditional maxims of both strategy and ‘nation-building’ to a situation which they did not fit. . . . We fought a military war; our opponents fought a political one. We sought physical attrition; our opponents aimed for our psychological exhaustion. . . . The Tet Offensive brought to a head the compounded weaknesses . . . of the American position. To be sure, from a strictly military point of view, Tet was an American victory. . . . But in a guerrilla war, purely military considerations are not decisive: psychological and political factors loom at least as large. . . . Both the Hanoi Government and the United States are limited in their freedom of action by the state of mind of the population of South Vietnam, which will ultimately determine the outcome of the conflict.

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6. Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake the Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York: Back Bay Books, 2012).

Kissinger later stated in the same article: “It would be difficult to imagine two societies less meant to understand each other than the Vietnamese and the American.”<sup>7</sup>

The overall focus of the dissertation is an analysis of the evolution of the American advisory effort along with an analysis of the use of military advisors with regard to developing deeper cultural understandings between American and Vietnam societies, technical innovation and development, the nature of the conflict envisioned and executed, and the contemporary working environment. A long history of the American Army’s use of “advisors” in fighting its wars exists, such as European professional officers who advised the Continental Army under George Washington, Native American scouts used in the pacification of the American frontier, and soldiers from Southern states in service to the Union Army during the American Civil War. A rich historical background underlying the US Army’s experiences in fighting small wars is too broad and deep to be adequately covered in this dissertation.

The focus of this dissertation is not on the Vietnam conflict in general, which has been covered by other scholars, such as the evolution of the formal US commitment to preserving a non-

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7. Looking back, many historians have directed biting comments on American perceptions of the situation in South Vietnam and how the US conducted military operations during the critical “Americanization” period beginning in 1964. The majority of these retrospectives were written in the immediate aftermath of the war and in many cases are patently unfair to both the Johnson and Nixon administrations because while American perceptions of Communist political subversion throughout the rapidly decolonizing third world were shown (in the most part) to be fully rational, if flawed, these retrospectives were written by authors who knew how the story would end. Author Anthony Marc Lewis stated: “It is difficult even to grasp intellectually the fact that we construct the reality in which we operate. We take our perception of the world for granted. . . . We know what is real. We live in this reality and we act accordingly. . . . If someone else points out that our perceptions may be wrong, we may intellectually admit the possibility, but we continue to act as though our perceptions were true. We are familiar with illusions but dismiss them as interesting playthings. Our reality seems so solid, and we feel so in touch with it, that it is impossible for us to act with the realization that in fact our reality is inferred by us and may not match the reality which future events reveal. It is precisely in this feeling of certainty that the danger lies.” (emphasis added). Lewis goes on to quote a paper by Henry Kissinger prior to his joining the Nixon Administration for Foreign Affairs on the results of the Tet offensive of January 1968, in which he states: “overthrew the assumptions of American strategy.” Anthony Mark Lewis “Re-examining Our Perceptions on Vietnam,” Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, August 04, 2011. Declassified 1994. <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/kent-csi/vol17no4/html>. For those wishing another perspective on American misperceptions, see Frances FitzGerald, *Fire in the Lake the Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam*.

Communist South Vietnam that began in 1955; the roles of China and the Soviet Union in their support of Communist forces; developments in Laos and Cambodia that affected South Vietnam; the changes in Congressional sentiment as US involvement deepened after 1965; the battlefield tactics and evolution of US policy; Hanoi's strategy at key moments, such as the Tet Offensive in 1967–68, or the final months of US combat involvement in 1972–73 after US withdrawal of ground forces from Vietnam.<sup>8</sup> These are all interrelated aspects of this war, but they are beyond the scope of this dissertation.

By the time American forces became heavily involved on the ground in Vietnam, North Vietnamese and their South Vietnamese allies, the Viet Cong, had been conducting offensive operations for thirty years against both the Japanese and French. The Communist-led North

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8. For those wishing to understand the background of the thinking within US foreign policy circles in the period 1950–54 and the beginnings of US support for both the French and later for what came to be called South Vietnam, see *Pentagon Papers*, Gravel Edition, Vol. 1, 361–62 (Boston, Beacon Press, 1971), <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/doc2.htm>; 363–66, <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/doc3.htm>; and 367–69, <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/doc4.htm>. For a decidedly different perspective on whether the US should become involved in Southeast Asia, see George Kennan, *Memoirs, 1950-1963* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 58–60. In an August 21, 1950 memorandum to the Secretary of State I complained that, “In Indo-China, we are getting ourselves into the position of guaranteeing the French in an undertaking which neither they nor we, nor both of us together, can win. . . We should let Schuman [Robert Schuman, French Foreign Minister] know . . . that the closer view we have had of the problems of this area, in the course of our efforts of the past few months to support the French position there, has convinced us that that position is basically hopeless. We should say that we will do everything in our power to avoid embarrassing the French in their problems and to support them in any reasonable course they would like to adopt looking to its liquidation; but that we cannot honestly agree with them that there is any real hope of their remaining successfully in Indo-China, and we feel that rather than have their weakness demonstrated by a continued costly and unsuccessful effort to assert their will by force of arms, it would be preferable to permit the turbulent political currents of that country to find their own level, unimpeded by foreign troops or pressures, even at the probable cost of an eventual deal between Viet-Nam and Viet-Minh, and the spreading over the whole country of Viet-Minh authority, possibly in a somewhat modified form. We might suggest that the most promising line of withdrawal, from the standpoint of their prestige, would be to make the problem one of some Asian regional responsibility, in which the French exodus could be conveniently obscured.” This judgment with regard to the folly of a possible intervention in Vietnam rested, incidentally, not just on the specific aspects of that situation as we faced it in 1950, but on considerations of principle, as well. In a lecture delivered earlier that year (May 5) in Milwaukee, I had said, this time with reference to the pleas for American intervention in China, “I wonder how many of you realize what that really means. I can conceive of no more ghastly and fateful mistake, and nothing more calculated to confuse the issues in this world today than for us to go into another great country and try to uphold by force of our own blood and treasures a regime which had clearly lost the confidence of its own people. Nothing could have pleased our enemies more. . . . Had our Government been carried away by these pressures . . . I am confident that today the whole struggle against world communism in both Europe and Asia would have been hopelessly fouled up and compromised. Little did I realize, in penning these passages, that I was defining, fifteen years before the event, my own position with relation to the Vietnam War.

Vietnamese government clearly demonstrated a resolve to continue the struggle no matter what actions the South Vietnamese and their American allies undertook.

The chronology of the American advisers' role in confronting the Communists' insurgency in South Vietnam involves six distinct, but interrelated, periods, each of which represents a qualitative change in the way in which the US government approached rural pacification in South Vietnam. Beginning in the first two years of Ngo Dinh Diem's administration, from 1954 to 1956, Colonel Edward Lansdale, who reported directly to the Director of Central Intelligence Allen Dulles, hoped to recreate his earlier successes in the Philippines confronting the Hukbalahap Rebellion under the Presidency of Ramon Magsaysay. Lansdale led a drive to establish military and civilian civic action programs to compensate for the absence of a South Vietnamese governmental presence in the countryside. The CIA meanwhile began building a rural political organization to create popular support for the new government with decidedly mixed results. Neither effort was helped when President Diem, who tolerated if he did not always welcome these initiatives, set the tone of his own approach to rural pacification with a campaign of repression against the Viet Minh that ruthlessly targeted former Communist as well as non-Communist members.

The second period began with the conclusion of the First Indochina War after the battle of Dien Bien Phu and the signing of the Geneva Accords on July 21, 1954. During the four years of the French-Indochina War, the United States furnished the French military with large quantities of military equipment—tanks and aircraft to small arms, ammunition, and spare parts valued at more than \$1.2 billion.<sup>9</sup> At the conclusion of the war, the material was to revert to the United States

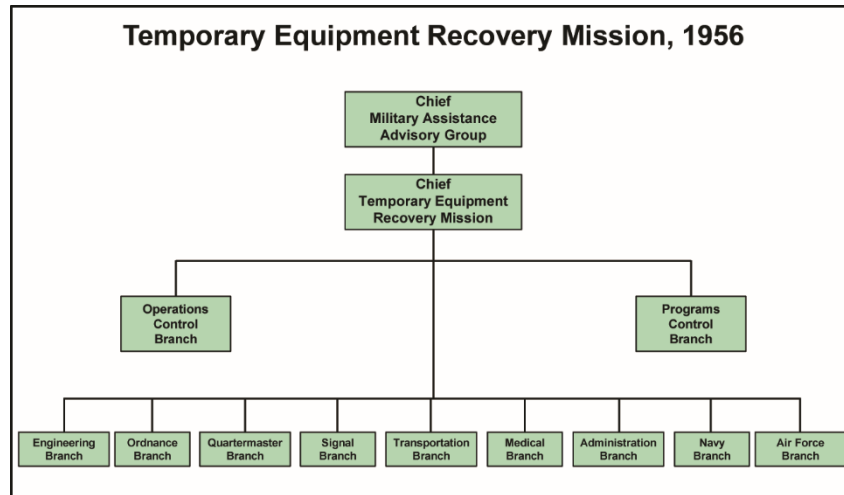
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9. Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs to Secretary of Defense, 25 Jan 56, 1-12377/6, U.S.-Vietnam Relations, 10:1045. The following is based, in part, on Vincent H. Demma, “The Turnover in South Vietnam after the Indochina War,” Center for Military History Monograph, 1969. quoted in, Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support The Early Years: The U.S. Army in Vietnam* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History 1985), 257



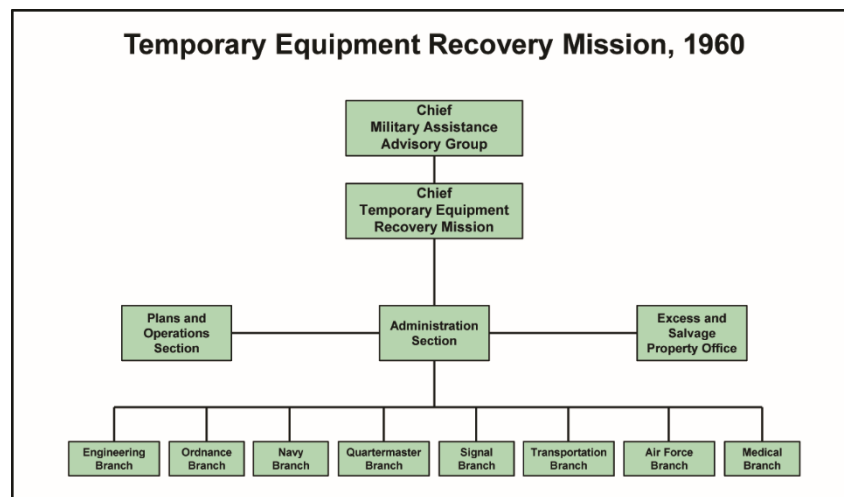
under the terms of the Pentalateral Agreement of December 25, 1950 between the United States, France, and the Associated States.<sup>10</sup>

Table 1. Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission, 1956.



Source: *Brief Summary of Past Significant Events*, Letter, HQ Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam, 18 August 1956..

Table 2. Temporary Equipment Recovery Mission, 1960.



Source: *Study on Army Aspects of the Military Assistance Program in Vietnam* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: HQ, USACGSC, 10 January 1980), D-6-1.

10. "Pentalateral Agreement Between Cambodia, France, Laos, Viet-Nam, and the United States of December 25, 1950," Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Vietnam Archive Collection, Document and Enclosures, MAAG, Cambodia, Records of the MAAG-V Part 1, Box 0010, Folder 0489, Item Number: F030600100489, n.d. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/575366](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/575366).

Despite that requirement, American officials in Saigon had made no plans or preparations for the return of the equipment. The understaffed American advisory group had kept no accurate records or inventories of material delivered to the French during the war. There was thus no recourse but to rely on the French for that information. The lack of records also made it impossible to determine which items of American equipment the French had purchased and which had been supplied under the Mutual Defense Assistance Program.

Under the Collins-Ely Agreement of December 1954, the United States and France would jointly survey surplus military equipment of American origin in South Vietnam to determine which items would be returned to the United States, transferred to the South Vietnamese, or retained by the French. American inspectors were to be allowed to examine French depots and embarkation points, and losses incurred in combat or through wear were to be charged off equally to French- and American-owned equipment. Faced with a growing military crisis in Algeria, the French proceeded to strip the best equipment for themselves. French officials sometimes refused to permit American inspection of their depots, and members of the advisory group reported that the French tried to remove assistance program markings from the equipment they wanted to take with them.<sup>11</sup>

Remarkably, it was during this period that Diem nearly destroyed the Communist organization in the countryside. But in so doing he also “dried the grass,” as the Maoists liked to describe the process of peasant alienation. The National Liberation Front for South Vietnam was authorized in 1959 by Hanoi to conduct armed insurgency through increased assassinations of South Vietnamese governmental officials, severely weakening Saigon’s hold on its rural population.

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11. Command and General Staff College, “Staff Study on Army Aspects of Military Assistance,” (Leavenworth, KS, US Army Command and General Staff College, n.d.), D- 7; MFR, Gen M.O. Perry, William Papers, Folder 3, 1 Feb 1956, quoted in, Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support The Early Years: The U.S. Army in Vietnam*. CMH Pub 91-1 (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1983), 257.

The third period ran from 1961 to late 1963, when the incoming Kennedy administration met expanding insurgency in Vietnam with a fresh increase of military and economic aid and with an eagerness to test current theories of counterinsurgency. The CIA launched a series of programs designed either to assist South Vietnamese village self-defense or to attack the insurgent organization at the local level. It also reinvigorated the Strategic Hamlet program, which became the core of President Diem's pacification strategy until his death in the coup d'état of November 1963. Following the assassinations of both Diem and Kennedy, there ensued a period of stagnation with a revolving door of South Vietnamese generals vying for power in Saigon, while in Washington a newly installed President Johnson prepared for the 1964 presidential election.

In the fourth period, from late 1963 through 1965, the US military and the CIA worked at the provincial level, experimenting with variations on earlier programs in the search for a pacification formula. As before, it emphasized village self-defense, local political organization, and an attack on the communist political and administrative apparatus.

Following Johnson's landslide election in 1964, his administration ordered a massive expansion of both US combat formations to help stabilize a tottering South Vietnamese government and the pacification effort. In 1967, recognizing that the situation in South Vietnam was becoming untenable, President



White House photo by Yoichi Okamoto,  
Figure 2. President Lyndon B. Johnson  
meeting with Robert Komer.

Johnson appointed Robert Komer as head of the Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program to reorganize the pacification effort.

Once in Saigon, Komer quickly reinforced his reputation as a man with a take-no-prisoners attitude resulting with CIA programs becoming the foundation of a unified US pacification strategy, the CORDS program. The critical feature of this fifth period, which lasted until 1969, was the realization that the decentralized pacification programs of the various US government agencies were unable to coordinate their activities efforts under Military Assistance Command, Vietnam. Nor were they able to successfully integrate intelligence and the Phoenix and Provincial Reconnaissance Unit programs in direct-action missions against the Viet Cong Infrastructure.

On November 3, 1969, in a nationally televised speech, newly elected President Richard M. Nixon announced that his administration had decided to return responsibility for the conduct of the war back to the South Vietnamese. Vietnamization, a program developed by Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, was intended to expand, equip, and train South Vietnam's forces and assign to them an ever-increasing combat role, and at the same time steadily reduce the number of US combat troops. It was at this point that the sixth and final period (1969–75) saw the gradual decay of the pacification programs. The South Vietnamese chose not to, or possibly could not, invest the energy and resources into the program now that the Americans were withdrawing. Sadly, the first to go were the programs used to win the loyalty of the rural peasants, followed by the decline of the Phoenix program against the Viet Cong.

With the departure of large US ground forces and the ensuing withdrawal of tactical air support, it was clear that the South Vietnamese government would not survive without the support of the South Vietnamese population. After twenty years of "hearts and minds" programs aimed to win their allegiance to the Saigon regime, they simply did not have it. The ignominious end came with the North Vietnamese general offensive of 1975 and the total collapse of the South Vietnam

government and despite the efforts of some revisionist historians' attempt to say otherwise, the US did lose that war.<sup>12</sup>

The scope of this dissertation is limited to the study of military and civilian advisory efforts in the Vietnam War from 1955 to 1963. The content is limited to only those records of military and CIA advisor activities and does not include a detailed analysis of similar efforts conducted by other US government entities conducting similar missions, which are only discussed when military and CIA advisors supported them directly or vice versa. Nonetheless, available unclassified records in the US National Archives, the Combined Arms Reference Library at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas; the Vietnam Center and Archive at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas; the Pentagon Papers at the National Archives at College Park, College Park, Maryland, and other various resources allows extensive research and provides analysis of the advisor program.

Forty years after the Vietnam War, a trove of primary, declassified material of the Department of the Army is now found in the National Archives, Washington, DC, along with numerous government and commercial publications of the period yields essential data. Many of these are to be found in Military Assistance Command, Vietnam/Military Assistance Command, Civilian Operations for Revolutionary Development Support (MACV/MACCORDS), Records Group 334, currently found in the National Archives.

In the years since the end of the American participation in the Vietnam War many scholars, foremost among them Dr. George Herring, have conducted extensive research in trying to understand why the United States became involved in Vietnam. Some have emphasized the importance of the Domino Theory believing that if South Vietnam fell to the Communists, it would simply be the first of many Southeast Asia nations to succumb. Others have stressed the horrific

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12. Michael Lind, *The Necessary War*.

aftermath of the appeasement of the Nazis and Fascists in Europe and the militarist in Japan resulting in the deaths of millions. These facts were on the minds of those who lived through the 1930s and who were now in power in Washington, DC.<sup>13</sup>

To understand the role advisors played in the Vietnam War, the author relied heavily on *The Pentagon Papers*.<sup>14</sup> Archival materials found in the Presidential Libraries and Museums of Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon; and additional information in the Historical and Special Collections Archives at the Central Intelligence Agency library, Langley, Virginia, provided invaluable recorded interviews, capturing many of the principal actors of the period. Additional sources are to be found among the many Rand Corporation studies sponsored by the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA). One final but significant element concerns the amount of available declassified research data. It is impossible to know whether or not the declassified data accessible for research portrays the most accurate description of the bulk of advisor activities throughout the Vietnam War. The records of failures or successes may be classified, undocumented, or lost.<sup>15</sup>

Chapter 2 begins with a discussion of Vietnam's long history of fighting for independence from foreign domination and up to the time Ho Chi Minh, Ngo Dinh Diem, and Vo Nguyen Giap come into power.

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13. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 75-107.

14. *The Pentagon Papers*, Gravel Edition, 12 vols. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).

15. For those wishing to broaden their knowledge of the evolution of the US Army's efforts on counterinsurgency and pacification from an American point of view, see Andrew J. Birtle *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1860-1942* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1998); Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942-1946* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1976); and Robert M. Cassidy, *Counterinsurgency and the Global War on Terror: Military Culture and Irregular War* (New York Praeger, 2006). There are many fine works from both British and French authors as well as the former Soviet Union that offer the reader nuanced perspectives on the practice of these techniques—perspectives that would not/could not be employed by the US military.

Chapter 3 discusses the background and events influencing the eventual decision for military intervention by the United States in Vietnam in the context of the Cold War struggle with Communists expansion.

Chapter 4 traces the development of the Communist's insurgency and their struggle to overthrow French control beginning in the 1930s to their seizing power in Hanoi following World War II. It addresses the use of terror and assassinations by the Viet Minh as tools for domination and control of the population and finishes with the surprising rise of Ngo Dinh Diem as first president of South Vietnam after partition in 1954.

Chapter 5 discusses the formation and goals of the National Liberation front and the subsequent acceleration of the Vietnamese Communists (Viet Cong) offensive against the South Vietnamese government. Finally, the chapter discusses the organizational structure of the People's Revolutionary Party and its components and their functions.

Chapter 6 recounts the ouster of Emperor Bao Dai and the establishment of the government of South Vietnam and the rise of Ngo Dinh Diem as first president of South Vietnam. It offers a review of the resettlement of some 900,000 predominantly Catholic Tonkinese refugees and other ethnic groups fleeing the north. The chapter discusses the measures Diem employed with the assistance of Colonel Edward Lansdale of the CIA to counter the influence of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao along with the Binh Xuyen gangsters to consolidate power. The chapter outlines numerous programs that were begun to assist the people, recounts their aims and shortcomings, and addresses the security efforts made to counter Viet Cong terrorist activities.

Chapter 7 goes into depth on Diem's Strategic Hamlet Program. It outlines the background of events leading to the need for the program, its objectives, problems of convincing the villagers to uproot and move to a new hamlet far from their field, the problems of planning, construction,

and administration which led to dissatisfaction and upheaval among those forced at gunpoint to move. The chapter also recounts the Viet Cong efforts to frustrate the program along with the establishment of several additional security organizations, the Civil Guard, Self-Defense Corps and the Force Populaire specifically conceived to protect the hamlets.

Chapter 8 sums up the pacification effort in South Vietnam, focusing on the situation we encountered with the Communist stronghold, the corruption of the South Vietnamese government and their unwillingness to work with the United States to resolve issues. Lessons learned on the part of the United States and a list of recommendations to avoid similar mistakes in the future.



## Chapter 2

### **A Thousand Years of Resistance**

For the Vietnamese, the war for independence from foreign domination began many centuries before with the Chinese invasion. Their long history of resistance to invasion started in AD 40 when the Trung sisters, Trung Trac and Trung Nhi, led the first Vietnamese insurrection against Chinese rule.<sup>1</sup> A traditional story recalls a woman who fought with them named Phung Thi Chinh, who according to legend gave birth during the battle but continued fighting with the infant strapped to her back.<sup>2</sup> The Trungs' newly independent realm extended from southern China to the ancient city of Hue. When the Chinese crushed their hard-fought independence two years later, the Trung sisters committed suicide by drowning themselves in a river. They have been revered by the Vietnamese ever since and are venerated in temples in Hanoi and Son Tay, both of which lay in North Vietnam in 1965.<sup>3</sup> In 1962, Madame Ngo Dinh Nhu, sister-in-law of South Vietnam's President Ngo Dinh Diem, erected a statue of the Trung sisters in downtown Saigon, to commemorate their patriotism and promote herself as their reincarnation.<sup>4</sup> In AD 248 another woman, Trieu Au, Vietnam's equivalent of France's Joan of Arc, led another revolt. Wearing golden armor, she rode into battle on an elephant at the head of a thousand men. She was just twenty-three when she was soundly defeated and committed suicide. Like the Trung sisters, she was commemorated in a temple and is remembered for her words of defiance: "I

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1. Hai Ba Trung, "The Patriotic Sisters," Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 08—Biography, Box 04, Folder 05, Item Number: 2360405028, n.d. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/278255](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/278255).

2. David Lamb, "Vietnam's Women of War," *Los Angeles Times*, January 10, 2003. <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-jan-10-fg-vietnam10-story.html>.

3. Hai Ba Trung, "The Patriotic Sisters."

4. Nigel Cawthorne, *Vietnam: A War Lost and Won* (London: Arcturus, 2012), 15 (ebook).

want to rail against the wind and the tide and the whales in the sea: sweep the whole country to save the people from slavery, and I refuse to be abused.”<sup>5</sup>

## **French Indochina**

China referred to Vietnam as Annam, the “pacified south, but it was seldom pacified.”<sup>6</sup> There were regular rebellions, often led by Chinese colonists who sought independence from the mother country. In 938–39, a provincial mandarin named Ngo Quyen defeated the invading forces of the Southern Han state of China and put an end to centuries of Chinese imperial domination in Vietnam. Using innovative tactics to overcome superior odds, Ngo Quyen ordered his men to drive iron-tipped spikes into the river bed in the estuary of the Bach Dang River, so their points remained hidden just under the surface of the water. Ngo Quyen ordered his own ships to withdraw as the tide ebbed. When the Chinese fleet gave chase and impaled themselves on the spikes, Ngo Quyen's boats turned back and destroyed them. The Vietnamese have a very long history of using guerrilla tactics to defeat a superior force.<sup>7</sup>

In 1258, 1285, and 1287–88 the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan invaded Vietnam to take control of the spice routes of the Indonesian archipelago to the south. Each time the Vietnamese general Tran Hung Dao defeated the vastly superior Chinese forces. Using tactics that were copied countless times over the succeeding centuries, Tran Hung Dao abandoned the cities, avoided frontal attacks, and used mobile forces to harass the enemy until they were confused and exhausted and ripe for a great defeat. In the Battle of Bạch Đằng River in 1287, the Vietnamese routed 300,000 Mongol troops. Tran Hung Dao celebrated his victory with a poem in which he

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5. Joseph Buttinger, *The Smaller Dragon: A Political History of Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1967), 105.

6. Nigel Cawthorne, *Vietnam: A War Lost and Won*, 15 (eBook).

7. Van Tan, “Viet Nam in the 10th Century.” Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 13—The Early History of Vietnam, Box 01, Folder 03, Item Number: 2410103014, March 1974. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/237708](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/237708).

declared that “this ancient land shall live forever.”<sup>8</sup> General Vo Nguyen Giap, the North Vietnamese military strategist responsible for beating the French, evoked Tran Hung Dao’s memory when he attacked the French in the same area.

At that time, Vietnam, Annam, only occupied the northern part of the country, roughly the area that became North Vietnam. After defeating the Mongols, the Vietnamese turned their attention to Champa, the kingdom occupied by the Cham people, which lay to the south. The war against Champa raged on for nearly 200 years until 1471 when the Vietnamese were able to capture and destroy the capital Indra-Champa, leaving only its magnificent stone sculptures which can still be seen today.<sup>9</sup>

With the conquest of Champa, Vietnam was exhausted and once again vulnerable to invasion by China. This time, the Chinese imposed brutal slavery on the conquered land forcing the peasants to mine for gold and other ores, while systematically looting the country. To impose their rule, the Chinese forced the Vietnamese to adopt their form of dress and hairstyles, issued identity cards, and instituted punitive taxes. In perhaps the cruelest form of subjugation, they outlawed the worship of the Vietnamese gods, suppressed literature, and taught only Chinese in schools.<sup>10</sup>

Vietnam’s own King Arthur revolted against this oppression. According to legend, he was a young fisherman named Le Loi who cast his net into a lake one day and brought up a magic sword. In reality, Le Loi was a wealthy landowner from Thanh Hoa Province in the north who served the Chinese before turning against them. In 1418, Le Loi declared himself the

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8. Joseph Buttinger, *The Smaller Dragon*, 152.

9. Thai Van Kiem, “The Influence of Champa on Vietnamese Culture,” *The Times of Vietnam Magazine* (October 3, 1959). [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/245498](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/245498).

10. Nguyễn Khắc Kham, “Introduction to Vietnamese Culture.” Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 06—Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Box 18, Folder 29, Item Number: 2321829008 1970. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/163691](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/163691).

“Prince of Pacification,” withdrew to the hills, and began a guerrilla war against the Chinese.<sup>11</sup> As the insurrection spread, the Chinese held on to the cities, but their columns used the roads which were defended by fortified towers. Le Loi’s adviser, the poet Nguyen Trai, set down their strategy in an essay that could be a handbook of modern-day insurgencies. “Better to conquer hearts than citadels,” he wrote.<sup>12</sup>

With the coming of the sixteenth century, the country was divided between two powerful factions, the Trinh and the Nguyen families whose regions of control corresponded roughly along the lines of the later division of the country into North and South Vietnam. In 1630, the rivalry became so acute that the southerners built two walls across the plain at Dong Hai, along the 18th parallel to the jungle, sealing off the north until the late eighteenth century. Meanwhile, the Nguyens actively courted Chinese help in their conflict with the Trinh.<sup>13</sup>

With repeated incursions by the Chinese lasting for the next two hundred years, Vietnam did not free itself from Chinese domination entirely until 1802, when the country was reunited under Nguyen emperor, Gia Long, with the help of the French. Using Western technology and French material support to free his country, Gia Long then turned against the French, expelling his French advisers and executing French missionaries. In 1858, Napoleon III sent an army to Vietnam which established the Cochinchina colony in the south. Central Vietnam, Annam, and the north, Tonkin, were taken over as protectorates in 1883. Along with Laos and Cambodia,

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11. Nigel Cawthorne, *Vietnam: A War Lost and Won*, 15 (eBook).

12. “Le Loi, The King of Pacification,” Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 13—The Early History of Vietnam, Box 01, Folder 05, Item Number: 2410105002, 1966. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/237863](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/237863). See also Judith Lee Clavir, “Better Conquer Hearts than Citadels: A Study in the Sociology and Social Change in Viet Nam. Ph.D. diss. University of Toronto, 1975.

13. Joseph Buttinger, *The Smaller Dragon*, 164–65.

Vietnam was incorporated into French Indochina and the Vietnamese struggle for independence began again.<sup>14</sup>



Courtesy of Robin Kern

Figure 3. French Division of Indochina, 1954.

14. Joseph Buttinger, *The Smaller Dragon*, 240–44.

## Ho Chi Minh

In the aftermath of World War I, a young Vietnamese man, Nguyen Ai Quoc, who called himself “Nguyen the Patriot,” while attending the 1919 Versailles Peace Conference in France, stood up and demanded his country’s freedom.<sup>15</sup> Born Nguyen That Thanh in Vietnam in 1890, he used numerous aliases throughout his life. He called himself Ba when he visited New York and Boston as a ship’s cook in 1911. After living in London from 1915 to 1917, he moved to France, where he worked a variety of jobs as a gardener, sweeper, waiter, photograph photo retoucher, and oven stoker.<sup>16</sup> Although his demand for freedom for his country in 1919 at the Versailles Peace Conference fell on deaf ears, it made him a national hero to many politically conscious Vietnamese.<sup>17</sup> In 1920, inspired by the success of the Communist revolution in Russia and Lenin's anti-imperialist doctrine, he became a founding member of the French Communist Party when they split from the Socialist Party.<sup>18</sup> In 1923 he went to Moscow and in January 1924, on the death of Lenin, he published a eulogy to the founder of the Soviet Union in the Communist Party newspaper *Pravda*.<sup>19</sup> Six months later, at the fifth Congress of the Communist International, he criticized the French Communist Party for not opposing colonialism more vigorously. In his statement to the congress, he formulated the revolutionary role of oppressed peasants, as opposed to the industrial workers mentioned by the founder of Communism, Karl Marx.<sup>20</sup> In 1924, he travelled to Canton, a Chinese Communist stronghold, under the name Ly

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15. Douglas Pike, “Ho Chi Minh: A Post-War Re-evaluation,” A paper presented to the 30th International Congress of Orientalists, Mexico City, August 3–8, 1976. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/289040](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/289040).

16. Douglas Pike, “Ho Chi Minh.”

17. Douglas Pike, “Ho Chi Minh.”

18. Douglas Pike, “Ho Chi Minh.”

19. Douglas Pike, “Ho Chi Minh.”

20. Douglas Pike, “Ho Chi Minh.”

Thuy, where he began recruiting fellow Vietnamese for his nationalist movement. In 1930, he founded the Vietnamese Communist Party with former school friend Vo Nguyen Giap.<sup>21</sup>

Vo Nguyen Giap was born in 1912 at An Xa, Vietnam, just north of the 17th parallel which later became the border between North and South Vietnam. While studying law at Hanoi University, he met Ngo Dinh Diem, who went on to become President of South Vietnam and Giap's bitter enemy. In 1939, Giap's anticolonist views brought him to the attention of the French colonial police forcing him to flee to China, leaving his young wife and child behind. They were arrested and died in a French jail three years later and his sister-in-law was guillotined.<sup>22</sup>

With the coming of World War II and the defeat of France in 1940 the political winds were changing, it was at this time that Ly Thuy changed his name to Ho Chi Minh, which means "he who enlightens." It was under this name that he became the father of Communist Vietnam and, despite his authoritarian rule, the seemingly kind "Uncle Ho" became a symbol of resistance to his people. On May 19, 1941, he and Giap founded the League for the Independence of Vietnam, or Viet Minh. Ho Chi Minh was the political leader of the Viet Minh, while Giap became its military leader.<sup>23</sup> Returning to Vietnam, Giap formed "armed propaganda teams," guerrilla bands which would later form the nucleus of the North Vietnamese Army, while Ho Chi Minh found himself languishing in the jail of an anti-Communist warlord for over a year.<sup>24</sup> With

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21. Douglas Pike, "Ho Chi Minh."

22. John C. Levanger, "General Vo Nguyen Giap: The Vietnamese Napoleon" (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Army War College, 2 April 1973), 6. National Technical Information Service, AD 761581. <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/761581.pdf>.

23. Dihn Sai Nguyen, "The National Flag of Vietnam," trans. by Nguyen Thuy Duong, n.d., 212–13. [http://www.vpac-usa.org/flag/The National Flag of VN.pdf](http://www.vpac-usa.org/flag/The%20National%20Flag%20of%20VN.pdf). The Viet Nam Doc Lap Dong Minh Hoi had previously formed in Nanjing, China. Between August 1935 and early 1936 the non-Communist Vietnamese Nationalist Party led by Nguyen Thai Hoc, some members of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP), and several other Vietnamese nationalists' parties formed an anti-imperialist united front. This organization soon lapsed into inactivity, only to be revived by the ICP and Ho Chi Minh in 1941.

24. Douglas Pike, "Ho Chi Minh," 15.

the backing of the US, the Viet Minh fought the Japanese who occupied Vietnam during World War II. When the Japanese were defeated in 1945, Giap entered Hanoi at the head of his troops. Soon after, in a speech in Hanoi where he quoted the US Declaration of Independence, Ho Chi Minh proclaimed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, which he led as president until his death in 1969.<sup>25</sup>

However, while the Viet Minh held Hanoi in the north of the country, the British had liberated Saigon in the south. To legitimize the reoccupation of its own colonies in Asia, the British rearmed newly released French prisoners of war to keep order until fresh French troops arrived.<sup>26</sup> Under the Potsdam Agreement of August 1945, which settled territorial disputes that arose at the end of World War II, the Nationalist Chinese were to disarm the Japanese in the north. A Chinese army under General Lu Han arrived in Hanoi and began looting the city and killing all political opposition. Giap barely escaped with his life. Meanwhile, the Chinese Nationalist leader Chiang Kai-shek agreed to hand North Vietnam, Tonkin, back to the French in return for relinquishing its old concessions in Shanghai and other Chinese ports.<sup>27</sup> During this period, Ho Chi Minh tried to get other countries to recognize his government in Hanoi. The US, in a bid to court French acceptance of its policies in divided Germany, backed the French. The Soviet Union refused to send an observer to Hanoi. Ho Chi Minh's old comrades in the French Communist Party also deserted him. The Vietnamese Communists conducted their revolution without aid from abroad.<sup>28</sup>

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25. Ho Chi Minh, *Selected Works*, Vol. 3, 2nd ed. (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1960–62), 17–21. See also Bernard B. Fall, *Ho Chi Minh on Revolution: Selected Writings, 1920-66* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1967); and Archimedes L. A. Patti, *Why Viet Nam? Prelude to America's Albatross* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980), 250–53.

26. *Pentagon Papers*, 1–52.

27. Archimedes L. A. Patti, *Why Viet Nam? Prelude to America's Albatross*, 315–16.

28. Bernard B. Fall, *Viet-Nam Witness 1953–1966*, (New York: Praeger, 1968), 119–20.



Ho Chi Minh was quick to appreciate the political reality of the situation. Upon their return to Tonkin, the French return showed every intention of reestablishing their old colony of Chochinchina in the south, while leaving the north in the hands of the Chinese who seemed to be in no hurry to leave. Ho Chi Minh was committed to national unity. He agreed to permit 25,000 French troops to garrison the north for five years, provided the French recognized Vietnam as an independent state within the French Union, the new name for the old French Empire.<sup>29</sup> The question of uniting Tonkin and Chochinchina would be decided later by a referendum. Ho Chi Minh came under heavy criticism from his fellow comrades for allowing the French back in without setting a date for the plebiscite. At a meeting in Hanoi, he fought back fiercely and stated:

You fools! Don't you realize what it means if the Chinese remain? Don't you remember your history? The last time the Chinese came, they stayed for a thousand years. The French are foreigners. They are weak. Colonialism is dying. The white man is finished in Asia. But if the Chinese stay now, they will never go. As for me, I prefer to sniff French shit for five years than eat Chinese shit for the rest of my life.<sup>30</sup>

In 1946, Ho Chi Minh went to France to try and negotiate the unification of Vietnam. Again, he received no help from the French Communists. The political lobby for the establishment of a separate “Republic of Cochinchina” was so strong that he was forced to initial

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29. Gerald Prenderghast, *Britain and the Wars in Vietnam: The Supply of Troops, Arms and Intelligence, 1945-1975* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, September 30, 2015), 38. See also *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 1–52.

30. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, (London: Penguin Books, 1983), 152.

an interim agreement to that effect. As he left the room, he said to his bodyguard, “I’ve just signed my death warrant.”<sup>31</sup>

Indeed, when Ho Chi Minh returned to Hanoi, Giap and other militant members of the Viet Minh were preparing to depose him when fighting broke out between the Viet Minh and French troops in the port of Haiphong over customs duty collection rights. On the morning of November 20, 1946, a French patrol boat seized Chinese smugglers. The Viet Minh intercepted the French boat and arrested its crew. This incident sparked unrest and by the afternoon there were barricades in the streets.<sup>32</sup> A ceasefire had been agreed upon, but the French decided to use the incident as an excuse to drive the Viet Minh out of the city resulting in hand-to-hand fighting. In addition, Viet Minh positions were bombed and strafed by the French Air Force and shelled by the French Navy. Estimates of the death toll vary, although in 1981 reliable Vietnamese sources claimed that there were “between 500 to a 1,000 dead.”<sup>33</sup> No one denies that there were several thousand civilian dead and wounded casualties.

The French then ordered Ho Chi Minh to disarm the Viet Minh. This was easier said than done: Giap deployed a reported 30,000 armed men in the suburbs, and on the evening of December 19th, fighting broke out again.<sup>34</sup> The French were confident of victory to start with by dint of force of arms. But they ignored the real cause of the war which was the desire of the Vietnamese people, Communist and anti-Communist alike, to achieve independence for their country. However, the French could offer unity. In 1949, they reunited Cochinchina with the rest of Vietnam, proclaiming the Associated State of Vietnam with former emperor Bao Dai as head

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31. Gerald Prenderghast, *Britain and the Wars in Vietnam*, 39.

32. Gerald Prenderghast, *Britain and the Wars in Vietnam*, 40.

33. Gerald Prenderghast, *Britain and the Wars in Vietnam*, 40.

34. Gerald Prenderghast, *Britain and the Wars in Vietnam*, 41.

of state.<sup>35</sup> Succeeding his father in 1925 at the age of twelve, Bao Dia did not ascend to the throne until 1932 after completing his education in France. He cooperated first with the French colonial government then with the Japanese in World War II. In 1945, he abdicated and briefly joined the Viet Minh before fleeing to Hong Kong in 1946 where he led a playboy lifestyle. In nationalists' eyes, the playboy emperor was nothing more than a French puppet when he returned in 1949. Meanwhile, the Viet Minh waged an increasingly successful guerrilla war, aided after 1949 by the new Communist Chinese government. Fearful of the spread of Communism in Asia, the US began sending large amounts of aid to the French.<sup>36</sup> But Giap had learned the lessons of Ngo Quyen, Tran Hung Dao, and Le Loi well and after harassing the enemy for five long years, he surprised French military strategists by moving his artillery 400 miles over rough terrain and supplying his troops over that huge distance to besiege the remote garrison at Dien Bien Phu, which fell in May 1954.<sup>37</sup>

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35. *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the First Indochina War 1947-1954* (Washington, DC: Office of Joint History, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2004), 31.

36. *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and the First Indochina War 1947-1954*, 147. While the US was reluctant to be drawn into the war, by 1949 the conditions affecting American policy in Indochina were changing. The new North Atlantic Treaty Organization was an alliance that included France. In the Far East, the Chinese Communists were clearly gaining the upper hand in their war with the Nationalist Party of China (KMT). In January Peking fell to the Communists and in April they took Nanking. The Nationalists began to collapse and the Viet Minh found that Mao's forces had crossed their common border. Time was now running out for France in Indochina. The threat to the French in Indochina suddenly seemed a threat to the whole region of Southeast Asia. At the same time, news in September 1949 that the Soviets had exploded an atomic bomb created a sense that the Communist Bloc was on the move. By March 1954, the Defense Department had expended \$123.6 million beyond the funds allocated in 1950–54 appropriations for aid to Indochina; it appeared that at least another \$100 million would be needed to meet French Union requirements.

37. To get a clearer picture of American thinking of the pending fall of Dien Bien Phu, see *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 482–87. <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/doc40.htm>.

Britain, France, the US, and the Soviet Union had already called a peace conference in Geneva to negotiate a ceasefire. To separate the warring factions, it was decided that the Viet Minh should stay north of the 17th parallel, while the French remained to the south. Between



Courtesy of Army University Press

Figure 4. South Vietnam.

them would be a five-mile-wide Demilitarized Zone.<sup>38</sup> Bao Dai rejected the peace plan. Nevertheless, he was defeated in a referendum by his Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem, who proclaimed himself president of a newly created Republic of Vietnam, that is, non-Communist South Vietnam.

The Communist-controlled area north of the 17th parallel became known as North Vietnam, though it was still officially the Democratic Republic of Vietnam with Ho Chi Minh as head of state and General Giap as Commander-in-Chief and Secretary of Defense. Both were committed to reunifying the country; by peaceful means at first. Under the Geneva Peace Accords, an election was to be held in 1956 with the aim of unifying the country under one government.<sup>39</sup> The Communists, who had built up a powerful political organization in both halves of the country, were confident of victory.<sup>40</sup> Diem refused to hold the elections and he was backed by the US who feared a Communist takeover. The Communists saw Diem as an American puppet and in 1960, the government in Hanoi decided that the only way to reunify the country was by force. While the avuncular Ho Chi Minh spent his time portraying the war as the defensive action of a backward nation bullied by a superpower, Giap took charge of the war. In

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38. The French position during negotiations (both leading to and during) the Geneva Conference are best stated in the *Pentagon Papers* as “France’s rejection of American conditions and suggestions was based on the Laniel government’s conviction, implemented zealously by French civil and military authorities in Indochina, that the United States would be intruding in France’s domain.” For the American perspective on the conference see *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 108–46. <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/pent7.htm>. A critical memorandum from BG C.H. Bonesteel outlined three courses of action for future US actions in Southeast Asia as a result of French defeat at Dien Bien Phu and at the Geneva Conference. See *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 506. <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/pentagon/doc46.htm>.

39. “The Final Declaration of the Geneva Conference: On Restoring Peace in Indochina,” The Department of State Bulletin XXXI, No. 788, July 21, 1954, 164. See also Congress, US Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, 90th Cong. 1st sess. *Background Information Relating to Southeast Asia and Vietnam*, 3rd rev. ed. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, July 1967), 50–62. The territory south of the 17th parallel, that would later be called South Vietnam, would now comprise an area of 66,200 square miles and a population of some twenty million; it was a country bigger than England and Wales put together with less than a third of the population.

40. “It was generally conceded that had an election been held, Ho Chi Minh would have been elected Premier.” Found in Dwight D. Eisenhower, *The White House Years: Mandate for Change: 1953–1956: A Personal Account* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co, Inc, 1963), 337–38. <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/vietnam/55election.htm>.

1961, Giap spelled out exactly how he intended to reunify the country by publishing a manual of guerrilla warfare called *People's War, People's Army*, that in a remarkably candid fashion told the US military and Central Intelligence Agency exactly what they were set to encounter.<sup>41</sup>

To fully understand the complexity of a “peoples war,” one must first place into context the argument that in Vietnam the Communists, often viewed as “North Vietnamese,” triumphed in 1975 using a conventional-war strategy rather than engaging in a successful people’s or revolutionary war. This argument is obviously not a new one, and it may even represent the predominant view of the war among senior American military officers and government officials. At first glance the argument appears to be quite reasonable, buttressed by the credentials of the people making it, and it has great appeal to readers who may want to avoid interpretations implying that the United States lost the war in Vietnam because of its inability to combat a Communist insurgency.<sup>42</sup>

Finally, with the landside 1964 election safely behind him, newly elected President Lyndon B. Johnson had his mandate to govern. On March 2, 1965, one hundred US jet bombers took off from Da Nang air base to strike at targets in the north. This was the first air strike against North Vietnam that could not be justified as retaliation against the Viet Cong and it began a sustained campaign of graduated bombing known as Operation Rolling Thunder that continued on and off for the next three years. Its aim was to slow the infiltration of men and

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41. Vo Nguyen Giap, *People's War People's Army: The Viet Cong Insurrection Manual for Underdeveloped Countries*, (Honolulu, HI: University Press of the Pacific, 2001). For examples see Anthony T. Bouscaren, ed., *All Quiet on the Eastern Front: The Death of South Vietnam* (Old Greenwich, CT: Devin-Adair, 1977)—in particular see viewpoints of Robert D. Heintz on page 64, Sir Robert Thompson on page 119, and Norman B. Hannah pages 148–49; Willard Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell, eds., *The Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Crane, Russak & Company, Inc., 1977), 279; Harry G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York: Dell Pub Co., 1984), 121–22; and Timothy J. Lomperis, “Giap’s Dream, Westmoreland’s Nightmare,” *Parameters*, 18 (June 1988), 30.

42. For examples see Bouscaren, *All Quiet on the Eastern Front*, 64, 119, 148–49; Thompson and Frizzell, *The Lessons of Vietnam*, 279; Summers, Jr., *On Strategy*, 121–22; and Lomperis, “Giap’s Dream, Westmoreland’s Nightmare,” 30.

supplies from the north and bomb the Communists to the negotiating table. It succeeded in neither, but America was now committed to a course of action and President Johnson had raised the political price of failure. That same day, the four ships of Amphibious Task Force 70 set sail from Japan. The Second Indochina War—the American war in Vietnam—was now underway.<sup>43</sup>

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43. Edward J. Marolda, “The Years of Combat, 1965-1968,” in *By Sea, Air, and Land* (Washington, DC: Naval History and Heritage Command, 8 November 1997). <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/b/by-sea-air-land-marolda/chapter-3-the-years-of-combat-1965-1968.html>.

## Chapter 3

### **The US Army's Effort to Counter the Communist Insurgency in South Vietnam**

#### **“How Can We Lose When We're So Sincere?”<sup>1</sup>**

If anything can be safely said of what Americans call the Vietnam War it is that the conflict demonstrated all the following elements: anticolonialism, nationalism, xenophobia, and the horrendous loss of life. Each element played a part in the war. At the time, however, the war was seen by the Communists in Hanoi as one of national liberation and by the American political and military leaders in terms of the existential struggle between communism and liberal democracy.

#### **Domino Theory**

To fully understand why the Vietnam War became a disaster for both Vietnams (North and South) and the Americans sent to that war, observers must recognize two flawed perceptions linked to the Domino Theory: (1) Many of Washington DC's foreign policy elite viewed Vietnam through the prism of two historical events. First, the “who lost China?” question was of major political significance within Washington governing circles—and one which had a particular constraining effect on the Democratic Party significantly shaping political decisions made by Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson. Second, the recently concluded and bitterly fought Korean War made an inescapable immediate historical precedent. The conventional wisdom within the decision-making circles of Washington firmly held that the Domino Theory dictated that a loss of a country to the Communists was a zero-sum game. The

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1. Robert Hopkins Miller, *Vietnam and Beyond: A Diplomat's Cold War Education* (Lubbock, TX: Texas Tech University Press, 2002), 56.



true implications of a newly established Red China sharing a border with North Vietnam, both dedicated to destabilizing the post-World War II political status quo, would not become clear until several decades later. (2) Viewing events through the prism of the Domino Theory, American policymakers completely misinterpreted the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 and France's subsequent withdrawal from Vietnam. Instead of seeing France's defeat as the end of the colonial era in Southeast Asia, Washington was still coming from a Cold War perspective and held on to its inflexible belief that China was the main threat to South Vietnam.<sup>2</sup> In fact it was the fervent, unyielding, nationalistic desire of the North Vietnamese to reunify their country that was our true opponent.<sup>3</sup> An interesting footnote to confronting Communists' aggression in South Vietnam deals with the actual reason the United States became involved in the conflict. Although President Lyndon B. Johnson stated that the aim of the Vietnam War was to secure an "independent, non-Communist South Vietnam," a January 1965 memorandum by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara stated that an underlying justification was "not to help a friend, but to contain China." On November 3, 1965, McNamara sent a memorandum to President Johnson, in which he explained the "major policy decisions with respect to our course of action in Vietnam." The memorandum begins by disclosing the rationale behind the bombing of North

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2. See "The Nation: Pentagon Papers: The Secret War," *Time*. June 28, 1971. Robert S. McNamara, "Draft Memorandum From Secretary of Defense McNamara to President Johnson," United States Department of State, Office of the Historian. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968, Vol. III, Vietnam, June–Dec 1965, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v03/d189>.

3. There were strong misperceptions of exactly who the Americans were trying to defend the South Vietnamese against. Hundreds of thousands of American soldiers fought in Vietnam wearing a Military Assistance Command shoulder patch symbolically depicting the shining sword of America repelling Chinese aggression. Military Assistance Command patch symbology: Yellow and red are the colors of Vietnam. The red ground alludes to the infiltration and aggression from beyond the embattled wall (i.e., the Great Wall of China). The opening in the wall, through which this infiltration and aggression flow, is blocked by the sword representing United States military aid and support. The wall is arched and the sword is pointed upward in reference to the offensive action pushing the aggressors back. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam, also known as Pentagon East, arrived in Vietnam February 8, 1962, absorbed the Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam, and departed March 29, 1973. The headquarters was at Tan Son Nhut, Saigon. US Army Shoulder Sleeve Insignia (Institute of Heraldry), TIOH Dwg. No. A-1-309, <https://www.scribd.com/doc/141893693/US-Army-Shoulder-Sleeve-Insignia-Institute-of-Heraldry>.

Vietnam in February 1965: “The February decision to bomb North Vietnam and the July approval of Phase I deployments make sense only if they are in support of a long-run United States policy to contain China.”<sup>4</sup>

In Gordon M. Goldstein’s book, *Lessons in Disaster: McGeorge Bundy and the Path to War in Vietnam*, he details the role played by Bundy, Kennedy’s national security adviser, in taking the country to war in Vietnam. According to Goldstein, Bundy and many within the Kennedy and Johnson administrations were committed to the Domino Theory, and as Henry Kissinger puts it in his review of the book:

Bundy and his senior colleagues defined the domino effect as involving the Philippines, Thailand, Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, South Korea and Taiwan. . . .

The new Kennedy administration even added a philosophical refinement. Vietnam was no longer treated as one of the many fronts in the global cold war, but as the central front.<sup>5</sup>

Nor was this thinking unreasonable to those who had lived through the prewar appeasement of the fascists in Europe or the militarists in Japan. George Kennan’s theory of containment was the essential organizing idea used in fighting the Cold War. The combination of the generous Marshall Plan in stabilizing postwar privation in those countries stripped of their industries, coupled with the establishment of NATO to provide security to shattered nations

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4. “COVER STORY: Pentagon Papers: The Secret War,” *CNN*, June 28, 1971. See also, “The Nation: Pentagon Papers.. Robert S. McNamara, “Draft Memorandum From Secretary of Defense McNamara to President Johnson.”

5. Henry Kissinger stated, “With departmental memoranda and personal letters seeking to influence the president, the real debate took place more or less ad hoc in the meetings of the National Security Council or at informal meetings of cabinet-level officials. Decisions were reached but no settled strategy was agreed upon. The administration slid into a series of ad hoc decisions that pre-empted Kennedy’s strategic choice. Presidents, in any event, are prone to avoid confrontations, having reached their eminence in part by merging seemingly contradictory constituencies. Both Kennedy and Johnson, according to Goldstein, occasionally went so far as to instruct cabinet members on what recommendations they would welcome at formal meetings in order to avoid having to overrule some associate openly.” Henry Kissinger, “Kissinger: The Lessons of Vietnam,” *Newsweek*, 10/24/08. <https://www.newsweek.com/kissinger-lessons-vietnam-919439>.

allied with the United States, was seen to have thwarted direct Soviet attacks on Western Europe. But Communist movements had overthrown governments in Eastern Europe, China, and Central America. The 1956 Polish Crisis, the crushing of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution, the 1959 Cuban Revolution, unrest in both Iran and Guatemala, and the 1968 “Prague Spring” demonstrated to Western leaders that the new and emerging Cold War threats were achieved not through political debate but through force, subversion, and insurgency.<sup>6</sup>

To combat Communist aggression in South Vietnam, “counterinsurgency” emerged as the new watchword throughout the Vietnam War consisting of numerous efforts to rid the Vietnamese countryside of the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA). These efforts supported a multitude of specified programs including the Chieu Hoi program, the CIA-supported Phoenix operation (also known as Phung Hoàng), and the strategic hamlet program, with the intent of denying the Viet Cong access to South Vietnamese villages.

### **Pacification**

To prosecute the war and to administer the numerous programs established to conduct the counterinsurgency/pacification effort, first the MACV and then the CORDS structures were created. Pacification was the organizational structure for the policies of the combined US and South Vietnamese military efforts for destroying the Viet Cong. The theory behind the pacification initiative was to win the “hearts and minds” of the South Vietnamese villagers:

. . . pacification had become a catchall description for the self-interests of a dozen different US agencies, all with their Saigon government counterparts. The results were little more than a shared cliché—“winning hearts and minds,” and with the

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6. “COVER STORY: Pentagon Paper.”

military in overall control the priority was reflected in a slogan bandied by the Marines: Get “em by the balls and their hearts and minds will follow.”<sup>7</sup>

The pacification effort in Vietnam was designed as a means to both battle Communist insurgencies while at the same time build support for the popular Saigon regime. The stated US justification for America’s participation in pacification efforts was to ensure an independent and sovereign South Vietnamese government was able to protect itself.



Texas Tech University Photo Collection, Item No. VA004163

Figure 5. American advisor and district chief visit Catholic school in Long Khanh.

American pacification doctrine first established its roots between the 1950s and 1960s at a time in history when the struggle against insurgency in the former European colonies attracted widespread attention. For the former European colonial powers, and later the Americans fighting the Cold War in the newly decolonizing Third World, pacification meant “getting your hands dirty” in poor, underdeveloped nations struggling to resist Communist insurgencies. To defeat a Communist insurgency required all aspects of society to be mobilized including, but not limited to, the major social organizations, military recruitment, economic/agricultural improvements, and international diplomatic relations. In South Vietnam, this meant resolving the villagers’ security issues from both the military and civilian perspectives. In the civilian sector, pacification encouraged economic development, land transfer, and the expansion of political participation of the South Vietnamese within the South Vietnamese Government. In providing security for the

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7. Michael Maclear, *The Ten Thousand Day War, Vietnam: 1945-1975* (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1981), 255.

South Vietnamese, the South Vietnamese and their US military police agencies advisors provided security with US paramilitary and counterinsurgency forces supported by mobile, light infantry units operating to harass and defeat the Viet Cong guerrillas. Through the efforts of American advisors, the South Vietnamese military established special “cadre” teams to improve rural rice production and provided medical and veterinary services to the villages. In enhancing the economic opportunities for the villagers, American and South Vietnamese pacification teams offered a political alternative to the South Vietnamese peasant: freedom from oppressive Communist-based taxes and coercion and the opportunity to build an economic process throughout the countryside. Establishing successful outposts in the countryside required that both the South Vietnamese and the Americans fight against the Viet Cong Infrastructure (VCI).

The term “pacification” assumed many roles throughout the Vietnam War with multiple programs exercising varying degrees of authority and responsibility for the village hamlets. This included, but was not limited to improving the economic, medical, agricultural, and social futures of the villages. The CIA along with the US Army working in concert with numerous American civilian agencies played a critical role in the attempt. Advisers provided not only technical and, administrative advice, but, military support as well to South Vietnamese villages.



US Army Photo b SP4 Joel M. Shamus

Figure 6. American advisor helps villagers with the construction of a bridge.

Pacification is defined as:

. . . the military, political, economic, and social process of establishing or reestablishing local government responsive to and involving the participation of the people. It includes the provision of sustained, credible territorial security, the destruction of the enemy's underground government, the assertion or re-assertion of political control and involvement of the people in government, and the initiation of economic and social activity capable of self-sustenance and expansion.<sup>8</sup>

Unfortunately, a number of influential political factors weakened the initiative, the most notable being the attempt to merge the independent military and civilian agencies under one unified command. This problem, exacerbated by the South Vietnamese determination to preserve their independence vis-à-vis the American military and political organizations, was not easily solved. Lack of a coordinated effort between these dueling governmental bodies and a



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Figure 7. American advisor and interpreter team talk with Long Toan district chief.

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8. Tran Dinh Tho, *Pacification* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Library, 1980), v.

general mistrust between an increasingly corrupt South Vietnamese government and the US military weakened the effort.

### Counterinsurgency

A review of the doctrinal concepts embraced by the American military during the war conclusively demonstrated how a failure to adapt a consistent and flexible counterinsurgency strategy toward pacification efforts coupled to unproductive military policies led to a long, protracted, and ultimately unsuccessful struggle against the Viet Cong. A thorough



Army News Feature photo

Figure 8. Advisor with Vietnamese troops.

reevaluation of the doctrines utilized by the Viet Cong cadres and their insurgent infrastructures will provide a greater understanding of the enemy the United States encountered. Different schools of thought, within the American military of prior counterinsurgent operations along with internal after-action reports generated by the military/civilian command structure of the United States will focus on fundamental problems that existed within both the South Vietnamese and the American approach to countering the Viet Cong Infrastructure within South Vietnam.



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Figure 9. American advisors and trainers with regular Vietnam army forces unloading in a heavily infested guerrilla zone.

Both the South Vietnamese and American military engaged the Viet Cong and the NVA openly in large unit offensive operations, attempted to interdict enemy infiltration using a massive bombing campaign, and sought to dismantle the Viet Cong Infrastructure in the countryside with the Phoenix counterinsurgency program. An honest analysis shows that ultimately these efforts failed to quash the enemy insurgency, and both the South Vietnamese and their American advisors failed to modify their strategy in favor of alternative approaches. The ineffective US effort, combined with the Viet Cong's determination to drive the Americans from Southeast Asia, led to the eventual withdraw of US troops from Vietnam.



## Chapter 4

### **The Beginning of the Viet Cong Insurgency**

Nationalist organizations of all stripes flourished within Vietnam in the 1940s. Following World War II, they continued to develop throughout the Viet Minh War against the French in the 1950s under North Vietnamese President Ho Chi Minh and North Vietnamese military leader General Vo Nguyen Giap's leadership. Both leaders instituted principles of governance consistent with the teachings of China's Mao Tse Tung. Under these men and others, military discipline and commitment to the unification of Vietnam would become the foundational cornerstones that would both motivate and sustain the Viet Cong insurgency and the North Vietnamese regular forces during the next twenty-five years.

Irrespective of contemporary efforts to characterize the Viet Cong as independent actors, the insurgency existed in South Vietnam as an extension of the political leadership of Ho Chi Minh and the politburo in Hanoi, North Vietnam. Through the use of propaganda and violence, Viet Cong party members sought to control the rural population in South Vietnam to pave the way for the North Vietnamese Army to reunite Vietnam under one nationalistic government.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Political Infrastructure**

In order to understand the extraordinary success achieved by Ho Chi Minh, Vo Nguyen Giap, and the Viet Cong, one must understand the basic structure and function of an insurgency.<sup>2</sup> Based on his experiences in Malaya, Sir Robert Thompson, who served as a consultant in Vietnam to the Allies, conflated parallels between the British occupation in Malaya and the

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1. Joseph J. Zasloff, *The Role of North Vietnam in the Southern Insurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1967).

2. Frank G. Hoffman, "Neo-Classical Counterinsurgency?" *Parameters* 37, no. 2 (Winter 2011-12): 1-17.

French and American experiences in Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> In *No Exit from Vietnam*, Thompson stated that the primary objective in an insurgency is a political rather than a military focus:

The primary weapon is this underground organization within the population. The secondary weapon is the guerrilla force which depends on that underground organization for all their requirements, but which, at the same time, supports the advance of the underground organization into the heart of the threatened government and country. The political aim is, therefore, dominant and guerrilla operations were designed to achieve political rather than military results.<sup>4</sup>

Learning from Mao Zedong's successful campaign in China to defeat the numerically superior forces of General Chiang Kai-shek, Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary movement conducted extensive subversive operations against the South Vietnamese forces to defeat them on both a moral as well as a psychological plane while simultaneously attempting to exhaust them through terror and attrition. For the Communists, political concerns determined the significance of military targets:

On the Communist side, the military target is always chosen according to its political impact. On our side, the enemy revolutionary warfare fighter seems to be the major target, if not the only one. The military "kill" becomes the primary target—simply because the essential political target is too elusive for us, or worse, because we do not understand its importance.<sup>5</sup>

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3. James M. Higgins, "The Misapplication of the Malayan Counterinsurgency Model to the Strategic Hamlet Program," (Fort Leavenworth, KS: US Army Command and General Staff College, 2001).

4. Sir Robert Thompson, *No Exit from Vietnam* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), 32.

5. Bernard B. Fall, *Viet-Nam Witness*, 265.

The US military learned that the battlefield tactics of their new enemy proved to be unlike any they had seen since the days of the Civil War, Spanish-American War, or the Banana Wars in the 1920s.

The weapons by which this war is fought include politics, diplomatic blackmail, interference in the domestic affairs of other nations, propaganda and controlled terror, all of which have somewhat dirty connotations in the American mind.<sup>6</sup>

In order to achieve Ho Chi Minh's political goal of a unified Vietnam under the leadership of Hanoi, the Viet Cong retained a stay-behind guerrilla force termed "regroupees" after partition under the Geneva Accords.<sup>7</sup> These guerrilla units consisted primarily of rural farmers in the villages led and disciplined by dedicated Communists political officers:

The other kind of Viet Cong was the local guerrilla: farmer by day, fighter by night. While main force units roved as far as 50 to 100 miles from their base areas, guerrilla units stayed generally close to home. These local units provided the day-to-day presence of the insurgent government in the countryside. Virtually every hamlet not immediately under the control of government forces had a Viet Cong squad. There was usually a platoon in each village.<sup>8</sup>

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6. Malcolm W. Browne, *The New Face of War: A Report on a Communist Guerilla Campaign* (New York: Bantam, 1986), 274.

7. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), "Southern Regroupees and Northerners in the Communists Military Forces in South Vietnam," 9 November 1966. Approved for release: 2002/08/26. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP78S02149R000200160005-7.pdf>

8. John H. Cushman, "Pacification: Concepts Developed in the Field by the RVN 21st Infantry Division." *Army XVI*, No. 3 (March 1966): 22.

Another important element in establishing control of an area by the Viet Cong was the use of assassination and abduction to intimidate the population. The primary targets for these terror actions were corrupt village officials along with real or suspected government informers. On the other hand, some officials or members of prominent families were apparently marked for death just because they were particularly respected or were well-liked by the villagers and therefore were even more dangerous to the Viet Cong than the unpopular ones, demonstrating that no one was safe.<sup>9</sup>

Table 3. Viet Cong Assassinations and Kidnappings.

<b>Viet Cong Assassinations and Kidnappings</b>		
	<b>Assassinations</b>	<b>Kidnappings</b>
1857-60	1,700	2,000
1961*	1,300	1,000
1962	1,118	1,000
1963	827	1,596
1964	516	1,525
1965	1,900	8,315
1966	1,732	3,810
1967	3,706	5,369
1968	5,389	8,759
1969	6,202	6,289
1970	5,947	6,931
1971	3,771	5,389
1972	4,405	13,119
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>38,513</b>	<b>63,506</b>
* From mid-1957 to mid-1962 an estimated 35,000 South Vietnamese soldiers and civilians were slain by the Viet Cong.		

Source: Southeast Asia Statistical Summary, Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), April 11, 1973, 1 -9, Table 2; Cited in Michael Clodfelter, Vietnam in Military Statistics: A History of the Indochina Wars, 1772-1991 (New York: McFarland & Co. In. Publishers, 1995), 47.

The Viet Cong have taken over large parts of the countryside through a combination of excellent organization, well developed and tested doctrine, and disciplined cadres. If the Republic of Vietnam is to regain these areas of the countryside, it must have an equally effective organization, an equally sound concept—and dedicated people. . . . Pacification must be planned and executed slowly, and in the greatest detail. Broad generalities were not enough. It is not enough to say we must win the hearts and minds of the people. Someone must go out on the ground and organize, train and equip a “people-winning force,” take this force step by step into each hamlet, and win the hearts of the people one heart at a time.<sup>10</sup>

Anything less than a thorough analysis of the strategies used by the Viet Cong to control large areas of South Vietnam would give a deceptively simple explanation of their effectiveness. It would not reveal the enormous amount of political groundwork that was necessary prior to a takeover and reveal little of the suppression of dissent that had to be taken after the initial military phase. Even a relatively peaceful takeover of a village assumes a military and political capability, good intelligence, and an adequate supply of money and personnel to maintain control. While the Viet Cong always enjoyed some support from outside South Vietnam, in the early years of the insurgency this support was confined largely to a trickle of weapons and a large stream of trained regroupees returning from the north. The Viet Cong, therefore, had to rely heavily on a careful mixture of military force, terror, and propaganda in order to expand from the base areas in South Vietnam which they had controlled since before 1954.<sup>11</sup>

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10. Cushman, “Pacification,” 21–29.

11. “210. Letter from the President’s Military Representative (Taylor) to the President, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963,” Report on General Taylor’s Mission to South Vietnam, November 3, 1961, Vol. I,

After more than thirty years of conflict, a Viet Cong political infrastructure was functioning at a very high level of efficiency by the time the United States made the political decision to deploy ground forces to Vietnam in 1965.<sup>12</sup> In General Vo Nguyễn Giap's book, *Banner of People's War, the Party's Military Line*, the victor of Dien Bien Phu describes the growth of the people's army over two decades of insurgency:

Our army is truly a people's army, born of the people and fighting for them. In twenty years, it has gradually developed from guerrilla units and masses' self-defense units into independent armed groups; from small guerrilla cells into increasingly concentrated units, including main-force, regional, and militia units; and from poorly equipped infantry units into armed forces with numerous branches and services operating with modern equipment.<sup>13</sup>

In the contest between the Government of Vietnam (South) (GVN) and insurgency forces, the Viet Cong benefited from three main factors in taking over a territory: (1) they might build up its political infrastructure and military force to a point where it could successfully challenge the government, (2) the government might withdraw its defense elements and even its

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Vietnam, 1961, Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Viet-Nam Country Series. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v01/d210>. See also Taylor, Maxwell D. Letter from the Military Representative to the President. Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963, Vol. III, Vietnam, 1963, Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Viet-Nam Country Series, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v03/d197>. In this memo to President Kennedy, General Taylor reviews the actions the guerrillas had inflicted on the US ally and stressed that there would come a point when Washington would have to make a decision as to whether to extend the war to North Vietnam. No drafting information is given on the source text, but in his memoirs, Taylor stated in *Swords and Plowshares* that the letter was drafted by both Rostow and him. See General Maxwell D. Taylor, *Swords and Plowshares* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), 243.

12. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 3, 433–85. “The situation which presented itself to the Honolulu conferees was in many ways the whole Vietnam problem in microcosm. What was needed to galvanize everyone into action was some sort of dramatic event within South Vietnam itself. Unfortunately, the very nature of the war precluded the abrupt collapse of a front or the loss of large chunks of territory in lightning strikes by the enemy. The enemy in this war was spreading his control and influence slowly and inexorably but without drama. The political infrastructure from which he derived his strength took years to create, and in most areas the expansion of control was hardly felt until it was a *fait accompli*.”

13. Vo Nguyen Giap, *Banner of People's War, the Party's Military Line* (New York: Praeger, 1962), 30.

administrative personnel for tactical considerations, or (3) the balance of forces in its favor might be affected by military operations in the region.<sup>14</sup>

If a village came under Viet Cong military control, in order to ensure that political control was also established three things took place: (1) there was a further terror against anyone suspected to support the South Vietnamese government, (2) the displacement of the previous elite was carried out ruthlessly, and (3) intensive education and political indoctrination took place.<sup>15</sup> In terrorizing a village after having assumed military control, the Viet Cong were apparently carrying to a logical conclusion several developments that had been set in motion by earlier terror: thoroughly frightening the villagers, destroying the government administrative apparatus, and rooting out the government intelligence system.<sup>16</sup>

### **Infiltration from the North**

The Preamble of the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) promulgated on January 1, 1960, was distinctly bellicose in condemning the United States and establishing the reunification of Vietnam as a Democratic Republic of Vietnam national objective. During 1959 and 1960, the relatively undeveloped intelligence apparatus of the United States and the Government of Vietnam confirmed that over 4,000 infiltrators were sent from North Vietnam southward—most of them military or political cadre, trained to raise and lead insurgent forces.<sup>17</sup>

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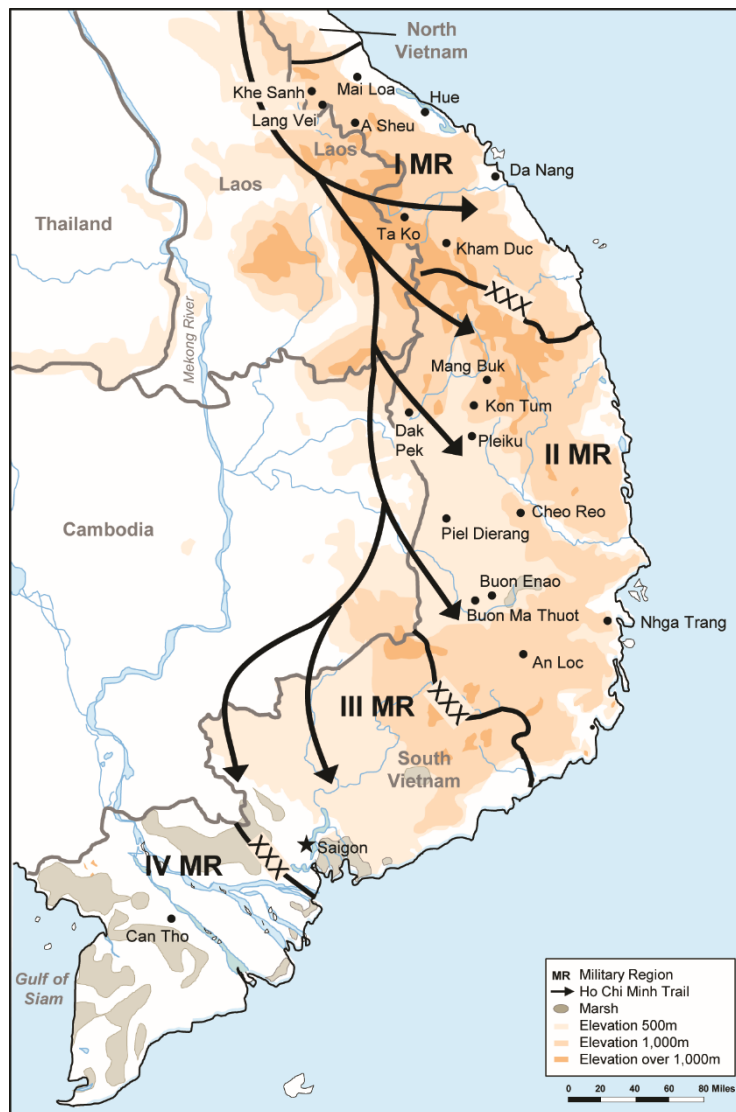
14. The author concludes that the Viet Cong would continue to fight a war of movement in which annihilation of the enemy was more important than occupying ground. The guiding principles of Viet Cong strategy and tactics are also discussed and analyzed. Pen-t'ao Chung, "Vietcong Strategy and Tactics," Translated by Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Foreign Technology Division, 1965. <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/682840.pdf>.

15. W. P. Davidson, "Some Observations on Viet Cong Operations in the Villages (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1967).

16. Davidson "Some Observations on Viet Cong Operations in the Villages." See also Douglas Pike, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam* (Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, 1966).

17. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 242–69.

The guerrillas thoroughly knew the geography and the language of the politically contested regions in the south. Infiltration from the north proceeded with little difficulty. For example, from 1959–63 infiltration rates from north to south increased dramatically with 4,556 infiltrators coming down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in 1959 and 1960, to 6,335 in 1961, and nearly 8,000 in 1963.<sup>18</sup> After 1964, a significant change took place in those infiltrated areas in the



Courtesy of Army University Press

Figure 10. Ho Chi Minh Trail.

18. Michael Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics: A History of the Indochina Wars, 1772-1991* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Publishing, 1995), 30–40. See also James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945 to 1990* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 97.



south.



Courtesy of Robin Kern

Figure 11. Infiltration routes used by the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army.

For the first time, ethnic North Vietnamese began infiltrating into South Vietnam. In October 1964, MACV estimated that about seventy-five percent of the infiltrators thus far that

year were ethnic northerners recently drafted into the NVA. Later information indicated that between seventy-five to ninety percent of the infiltrators in 1964 were North Vietnamese.<sup>19</sup>

In their book *The United States in Vietnam*, authors George McTurnan Kahin and John W. Lewis stated that:

Contrary to United States policy assumptions, all available evidence shows that the revival of the civil war in the South in 1958 was undertaken by Southerners at their own—not Hanoi’s—initiative. . . . Insurgency activity against the Saigon government began in the South under Southern leadership not as a consequence of any dictate from Hanoi, but contrary to Hanoi’s injections.<sup>20</sup>

There is no contradiction implied by Hanoi in sending thousands of southern-born personnel, that later became the Viet Cong, into the south. As stated in the memorandum entitled “Everything Senators Might Want to Know About Phoenix and You Were Afraid They Would Ask.” the US government was fully aware that:

After the signing of the Geneva Agreement in 1954 which divided Vietnam into two zones, the Communists withdrew 75,000 native southern Viet Minh cadres and troops – who came to be known as “regroupees” members (approximately 40,000 to 50,000) – also infrastructure – did not regroup and remained in the South to spearhead the political struggle against the new-formed Diem government. The Party’s early hopes and expiations of Diem’s collapse were frustrated by his success in holding the newly formed State of South Vietnam together and maintaining it as an ongoing, steadily improving nation. By the late

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19. CIA, “Southern Regroupees,” 1–2.

20. George McTurnan Kahin, and John W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam* (New York: Delta Publishing, 1967), 119–29.

1950s, the Party organization in the South which had been left behind after Geneva was virtually paralyzed and shattered. To arrest the decline, rebuild the Party apparatus, and undermine the Diem government, the Lao Dong Party Central Committee in January 1959 at its 15th Plenum resolved to initiate an armed struggle in the South. The infiltration of regroupees began in earnest. The regrouped cadres returned to their native areas, traveling through Laos and Cambodia and had the mission of reviving the weekend Party apparatus, rebuilding the infrastructure, organizing the population into farmers' groups, women's organizations, youth groups, etc., and reestablishing guerrilla groups.<sup>21</sup>

Of paramount importance was the cohesion of the revolutionaries when it came to the execution of internal and external policy in the formation of the insurgency in South Vietnam. By 1960, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was a thoroughly orthodox Communist state. Both the government and the society were dominated by the Communist Lao Dong (Workers) Party, and power within the party was concentrated to a small elite group—Ho Chi Minh and his lieutenants from the early beginnings of the Indochinese Communist Party in the 1920s.<sup>22</sup> These groups of leaders were unique in the Communist world for their homogeneity and for their harmony—research by the US intelligence services indicated that there was little evidence of the kind of turbulence which had splintered the leadership of many of the Communist parties at that time. To be sure, both the South Vietnamese and US intelligence service personnel were aware of disputes within the Lao Dong hierarchy—the fallout from the disastrous land reform program

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21. "Everything Senators Might Want to Know About Phoenix and You Were Afraid They Would Ask," Memorandum, 21 June 1973, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Central Intelligence Agency Collection, Box 15, Folder 200, Item Number: 04115200001, 21 June 1973. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/041/04115200001.pdf>.

22. Defense Logistics Agency, "A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, The Enemy," Vol. 1 (McLean, VA: The BDM Corporation, 30 November 1979), 2–12.

introduced by North Vietnam at the urging of their Chinese advisors in 1955–57 appears to be a critical period in that regard. Nonetheless, the facts are that there has been no blood-purge of the Lao Dong leadership and except for changes occasioned by apparently natural deaths; the leadership in 1960 was virtually identical to what it had been in 1954 or as far back as 1946.<sup>23</sup> This remarkably dedicated and purposeful group of men apparently agreed among themselves as to what the national interests of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam required, what goals should be set for the nation, and what strategy they should pursue in attaining them.<sup>24</sup>

### **Viet Cong Terror Tactics**

By the fall of 1959, the insurgency in South Vietnam began in earnest with the systematic implementation of assassinations, acts of overt terror, and kidnappings of prominent families. For the first time, Viet Cong units offered a direct challenge to the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Large Viet Cong formations seized and held district and province capitals for short periods of time and assassinations and kidnappings proliferated markedly.

With the launching of a general offensive, the terror tactics employed by the Viet Cong had two main purposes:

First, it aims to destroy the local government leadership notably as the main source of order and to destroy or intimidate other natural or potential leadership which would otherwise compete with the Communists. Second, it aims to create fear and a sense of insecurity among the people in general in order to make them

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23. Defense Logistics Agency, "A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, The Enemy," 2–12.

24. Defense Logistics Agency, "A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, The Enemy," 2–12.

responsive to Viet Cong demands upon them, and reluctant to support or collaborate with Government efforts.<sup>25</sup>

With the opening of Vietnamese archives along with the declassification of CIA reports, a consensus indicates that whether the rebellion against Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam proceeded independently of, or even contrary to directions from Hanoi through 1958, Hanoi moved thereafter to harness the revolution and bind the insurgency to reunify the country under North Vietnamese leadership.<sup>26</sup> There is little doubt that Hanoi exerted some influence over certain insurgents in the south throughout the years following the Geneva Accords. There is evidence which points to its preparing for active support of large-scale insurgency as early as 1958.<sup>27</sup> Whatever differences in strategy may have existed among Moscow, Peking, and Hanoi, it appears that at each critical juncture, Hanoi obtained concurrence in Moscow with an aggressive course of action.<sup>28</sup> As stated in a declassified report within the *Pentagon Papers*:

Accordingly, it was not “peaceful coexistence,” or concern over leadership of the “socialist camp” which governed Hanoi’s policy. What appeared to matter to Hanoi were its abiding national interests: domestic consolidation in independence, reunification, and Vietnamese hegemony in Southeast Asia. Both Soviet and Chinese policy seems to have bent to these ends rather than the contrary. If Hanoi applied brakes to eager insurgents in South Vietnam, it did so not from lack of

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25. Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics*, 42. An average of twenty-five local officials were assassinated or abducted each week in March of 1960. These figures only grew as the VC terror campaign expanded. For an extensive review of the terror tactics employed by both the VC and NVA during the Tet Offensive, see Victoria Pohle, “The Viet Cong in Saigon: Tactics and Objectives During the Tet Offensive” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1969).

26. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 242–69.

27. J. J. Zasloff, “Origins of the Insurgency in South Vietnam, 1954–1960: The Role of the Southern Vietminh Cadres” (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1967).

28. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 242–69.

purpose or because of Soviet restraints, but from concern over launching one more premature uprising in the South.<sup>29</sup>

With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that Ngo Dinh Diem was entirely correct when he stated that:

. . . his was a nation at war in early 1959; South Vietnam was at war with both the Viet Cong insurgents and with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, in that the latter then undertook to provide strategic direction and leadership cadres to build systematically a base system in Laos and South Vietnam for subsequent, large-scale guerrilla warfare.<sup>30</sup>

It was clear to General Maxwell Taylor upon his return from Vietnam, as a special representative of President Kennedy, that persuasive evidence existed by 1960 that Democratic Republic of Vietnam support of the insurgency in South Vietnam included materiel as well as personnel.<sup>31</sup> In any event, by late 1959 it seems clear that Hanoi considered the time ripe to take the military offensive in South Vietnam and that by 1960, circumstances were propitious for more overt political action.<sup>32</sup>



www.vietnam.ttu.edu, Item Number: /VA004740

Figure 12. General Maxwell Taylor (left) and Robert McNamara receive brief on Vietnamese Army Special Forces.

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29. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 242–69.

30. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 242–69.

31. 210. Letter from the President's Military Representative (Taylor) to the President, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963,"

32. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 242–69.

## Setting the Stage for Revolution in the South

For over a thousand years guerrilla warfare was a way of life in Vietnam, having well-established roots in bloody, protracted rebellions against several Chinese occupations as well as against French rule. With the explosive birth of Marxism acting as a catalyst for social change, Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary warfare sought to establish a totally new social order in Vietnam. In this sense, Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary efforts differed from previous Vietnamese insurgencies whose aim was either independence from foreign domination or a change in government. The North Vietnamese Communists along with their South Vietnamese allies, the Viet Cong, undertook aggression against their fellow countrymen on a scale previously unknown in Vietnamese history.<sup>33</sup> Communist aggression concentrated on socio-psychological rather than military goals. Extensive efforts and resources were devoted to the development of organizations through which the Communists could exercise political and social control. Such organizations were paramilitary or political fronts, political parties, and guerrilla units. The chief activities of the organizations' members were agitation and propaganda supported by terrorist and paramilitary activities.<sup>34</sup> The Marxist revolution was imported to the south and the grievances used to organize resistance against Saigon, though extensive and in many cases substantive, were often artificially induced or exaggerated.

While the 1954 Geneva Conference gave Vietnam an independent international identity separate from French colonial rule, it split the country at the 17th parallel into two political entities: the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was north of the 17th parallel and the Republic of Vietnam was south of the 17th parallel. The Communist leadership of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh considered the partition transitory; their South Vietnamese

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33. *Pentagon Papers* Vol. 1, 314–46.

34. *Pentagon Papers* Vol. 1, 314–46.

counterparts did not. In the aftermath of their decisive defeat of the French, Ho Chi Minh and the members of the North Vietnamese Politburo were bitter that the fruits of victory had been denied them by their fellow Communists in both the Soviet Union and Mao's China—each for their own reasons wanting to accommodate the Western powers led by the United States. That denial was strongly felt by the Vietnamese living in the north, who experienced the disastrous land reform program carried out under the guidance of Chinese advisors and wanted nothing more to do with Communism.<sup>35</sup>

Under the terms of the Geneva Accords, all Vietnamese were allowed free movement between North and South Vietnam. In 1954–56, the US conducted Operation Exodus, assisting somewhere between 800,000 to 1 million North Vietnamese moving to South Vietnam. It was estimated that somewhere between 30,000 to 100,000 South Vietnamese moved to North Vietnam. The mass migration to South Vietnam seeded the population at a ratio of about 1:10 with people strongly opposed to Communism and the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.<sup>36</sup>

### **War According to Mao's Teachings**

To compensate for the numerical and material advantages enjoyed by French colonial forces in the aftermath of World War II, a coalition of numerous nationalist political parties along with the Indochina Communist Party established the Vietnamese Lao Dong (Workers) Party, under the auspices of Ho Chi Minh's Communists within the Viet Minh Front. The Viet Minh leadership recognizing the relative strengths of the two forces strategically utilized Mao's successful strategy of protracted engagement against the French and their Vietnamese allies while conserving their own strength until they could move into the offensive.

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35. Christine Pelzer White, "Land Reform In North Vietnam," Agency for International Development, *Spring Review*, Country Paper, June 1970, [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/144517](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/144517). An extensive review of the Land Reform program instigated by the North Vietnamese at the urging of their Chinese advisors, that ended in disaster with horrendous loss of life and later causing Ho Chi Minh to apologize.

36. Pike, *Viet Cong*, 53.



From 1946–54, the Viet Minh employed terror tactics as old as war itself to compel the Vietnamese population to break with the old colonial administration. They employed such methods as assassinations of government officials and policemen, kidnappings of prominent Vietnamese and French families, as well as ambushes and hit-and-run engagements to keep the French off balance while the Viet Minh fought for time.<sup>37</sup> For the next eight years, the Viet Minh trained and expanded their forces and received sufficient supplies from sympatric Communist governments, primarily the USSR and Mao's China, to begin to engage the French and their allies in static, main-force battles.<sup>38</sup>

With sufficient time to observe the Communists' methods against the French, American forces understood what they would face as they stepped into the fray. On May 25, 1961, in a speech before a joint session of Congress, President Kennedy provided the following description of a new terror campaign initiated by the Viet Cong in South Vietnam:

Their aggression is more often concealed than open. They have fired no missiles; and their troops are seldom seen. They send arms, agitators, aid, technicians and propaganda to every troubled area. But where fighting is required, it is usually done by others, by guerrillas striking at night, by assassins striking alone, assassins who have taken the lives of 4,000 civil officers in the last 12 months in Vietnam, by subversives and saboteurs and insurgents, who in some cases control whole areas inside of independent nations.<sup>39</sup>

Following the end of the First Indochina War and French withdrawal, the character of the post-1954 struggle to reunite all of Vietnam changed. Due to an extensive underground of stay-

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37. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 314–46.

38. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 314–46.

39. Pike, *Viet Cong*, 33.

behind Communist cadre ordered to keep a low profile along with the increasing infiltration of southern-born Vietnamese returning from the north, the conflict that developed between the Communists and the newly created government of South Vietnam was perceived by many southerners as deliberately instigated by Hanoi. This differentiated the post-1954 conflict from the anti-French war, which was clearly anticolonial and nationalist.<sup>40</sup>

### **The Rise of Ngo Dinh Diem and a Vacuum in the South**

In the aftermath of the First Indochina War, Emperor Bao Dai's abdication, and the Viet Minh later deposed by the election of Ngo Dinh Diem, the newly formed Republic of Vietnam suffered from a lack of organization and skilled civil service. The departure of the French civil administrators, particularly in the rural areas, created a vacuum that greatly aided the Communists in creating a virtual shadow government that provided medical services, security, and most importantly collected taxes to support their recruitment and propaganda efforts.<sup>41</sup> In addition to the lack of any government structure, there was a great shortage of hands-on technical expertise to man everything from the electrical system to the simple requisitioning of supplies along with the leadership skills needed to oversee the work. Making progress more difficult was rigid native conservatism, particularly under President Ngo Dinh Diem, all of which limited the government's ability to make the political compromises needed to secure the loyalty and support of the various diverse religious and political groups then existent in the south. To American observers there existed widely divergent political and religious entities—such as the Hoa Hao, Cao Dai religious factions and the Dai Viet, monarchists, Vietnam Quoc Dan Dang political parties, and incredibly, the Bình Xuyên river pirates who controlled not only organized crime but also the Saigon police department. Many of the groups numbering as many as one million

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40. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 314–46.

41. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 314–46.

members, were heavily armed and often controlled large areas of the countryside, existing as virtual governments.

These factions maintained fierce independence, refusing to submit to the Diem government to form a united effort against the Communists. Many patriotic Vietnamese nationalists, who at one time had been members of the Viet Minh but who were not Communists, came under suspicion and were not allowed to participate in the newly formed South Vietnamese government under Diem.<sup>42</sup>

Adding to these worries, the North Vietnamese refused to renounce their claim of a united Vietnam, believing that in defeating the French that they and they alone represented the true wishes of the Vietnamese people. On September 2, 1945, in North Vietnam's Declaration of Independence, Ho Chi Minh stated:

We, members of the Provisional Government of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, solemnly declare to the world that Viet Nam has the right to be free and independent, and in fact is so already. The entire Vietnamese people are determined to mobilize all their physical and mental strength, to sacrifice their lives and property in order to safeguard their freedom and independence.<sup>43</sup>

With the signing of the Geneva Accords in September 1955 and the dividing of Vietnam along the 17th parallel, the Communists announced the formation of the Fatherland Front:

In every respect, historical, geographical, economic, cultural, social and national, Vietnam is a single, indivisible entity, built up by our ancestors in generations of

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42. Pike, *Viet Cong*, 75.

43. *The Pentagon Papers*, 5–56. See also Robert F. Turner, *Vietnamese Communism: Its Origins and Development* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1975), 134.

labor and struggle. Certainly, no force can divide it. This is why our entire people from North to South, both men and women, regardless of class or creed should assume the sacred duty of reunifying our country, in a single-hearted common effort.<sup>44</sup>

Emphasizing that the goal of a unified Vietnam was the one issue that Hanoi would not compromise on with the South Vietnamese. On January 1, 1960, the North Vietnamese revised their Constitution stating: “Vietnam is a single entity, from Lang-Son to Camau.” This was further stressed in international forums and was stated forcefully at the Third Lao Dong Party Congress of September 1960, where this statement was issued:

In the present stage, the Vietnamese revolution has two strategic tasks: first, to carry out the socialist revolution in North Vietnam; second, to liberate South Vietnam from the ruling yoke of the U.S. imperialists and their henchmen in order to achieve national unity.<sup>45</sup>

In an article published in the Communist newspaper *Hoc Tap*, Hanoi explicitly laid out its determination to unite all of Vietnam using any means necessary stating:

The path of Vietnamese revolution in the South is the path of general uprising to seize political power . . . it is the objective . . . of the struggle of the whole Party and people at present. Therefore, all facets of activities must be actively carried out. . . . The path of general uprising to seize political power is the path of long-term political struggle combined with armed struggle. . . . Armed struggle is

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44. Allen W. Cameron, ed., *Vietnam Crisis—A Documentary History*, Vol. I: 1940-1956 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971), 394–401.

45. Cameron, *Vietnam Crisis*, 66.

aimed at serving political struggle . . . it aims chiefly at building the political forces of the working-class peasants.<sup>46</sup>

In this same article, Hanoi gave detailed instructions for the southern Communists to establish both political and military organizations to advance the cause of liberation, placing a heavy emphasis on the formation of military formations.<sup>47</sup> On March 28, 1960, the Lao Dong Party Committee for South Vietnam party chapters wrote a letter giving instructions on what actions were to be taken regarding these South Vietnamese civil and military programs.<sup>48</sup> In December 1960, the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam in a radio address announced that: “The sacred task” of the National Liberation Front “was to liberate the south.”<sup>49</sup> From these statements and actions, it was clear to see that Hanoi was directing the National Liberation Front of which there were some 4,556 northern and “regrouped” agents in the south.<sup>50</sup>

### **“It Would be Like Putting a Baby in a Cage of Hungry Lions”<sup>51</sup>**

In the wake of the French disaster at Dien Bien Phu, Diem’s resources were so few and his opponents so numerous that many, even his US sponsors, anticipated a speedy Viet Minh victory. In addition, until 1955 the French maintained their hold on both the army and the national treasury limiting Diem’s freedom to maneuver. Diem had no political base outside a modest following in Central Vietnam. His assets consisted of an iron will, US support, the

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46. Gareth Porter, ed., *Vietnam: The Definitive Documentation of Human Decisions*, Vol. 1 (Stanfordville, NY: Earl M. Coleman Enterprises, Inc., 1979), 52–56.

47. Porter, *Vietnam*, 52–56. See also Michael Charles Conley, *The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure in South Vietnam: A Study of Organization and Strategy*, Vol. I (Washington, DC: Study, Center for Research in Social Systems, July 1967), 152–245. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/1353/13530303001.pdf>.

48. Porter, *Vietnam*, 52–56. See also Michael Charles Conley, *The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure in South Vietnam*, 152–245.

49. Department of State, *A Threat to the Peace: North Vietnam’s Effort to Conquer South Vietnam*, Publication No. 7318, Far Eastern Series (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, December 1961), 15.

50. Defense Logistics Agency, “A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam. Volume I: The Enemy.” Chapter 1, 10–12; Chapter 2, 9–12.

51. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 108–46.

loyalty of the Catholic minority, and the forbearance of the southern Communist organizations, 90,000 of whose activists were about to be regrouped to the North.<sup>52</sup> In truth, the US commitment sprang not from any perception of political vitality in the new government, but from the sense that Communist expansion must be resisted no matter the odds.

The foundation for US support for the newly established government in Saigon was based on a consensus within the American foreign policy establishment that both a military but also an ideological struggle for influence was necessary. The United States had to rebuff any Communist's moves to expand its influence into former European colonies. In a Joint Staff Planners meeting on August 29, 1945, Vice Admiral Russell Wilson read from his draft on the new military policy:

When it becomes evident that forces of aggression are being arrayed against us by a potential enemy, we cannot afford, through any misguided and perilous idea of avoiding an aggressive attitude, to permit the first blow to be struck against us. Our government, under such conditions, should press the issue to a prompt political decision, while making all preparations to strike the first blow [if] necessary.<sup>53</sup>

### **American Perceptions and the Coming of National Security Council 68**

American policymakers chose to employ containment in Vietnam beginning in the mid-1950s not because they saw the Communists as implacably hostile in the near term, although many certainly were. Policymakers knew both the Soviets and the Chinese wanted peace to rebuild after their own devastating wars, yet they feared that unchecked expansion could lead to

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52. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 108–46.

53. Joint Chiefs of Staff, "Basis for the Formulation of a U.S. Military Policy," Memorandum SWNCC 282, March 27, 1946.

additional confrontations offering unforeseen dangers. Thus was set the conditions for the ideological confrontation that would see a clash of ultra-nationalist revolutionaries bent on reuniting their country under Communist leadership and an American administration acting as a champion for self-determination.

To better understand the complexity facing the Americans and the South Vietnamese of managing the war, it is important to understand that there were several wars overlapping each other. Each with their own goals, advocates, and logic comprising three overlapping forms. First is the military, a war of movement carried to the battlefield in the holds of the ubiquitous “Huey” helicopters, pitting US and ARVN forces against the Communists’ NVA regulars. Second is the struggle of the South Vietnamese government to create national political institutions and win the support and loyalty of the people in the countryside. Third, the part of the story told here, is the struggle to suppress the Viet Cong and protect the peasantry. It is told primarily from the perspective of the CIA and American military advisors who supported and helped to shape the South Vietnamese government’s effort to defeat the insurgency through the creation of specific programs targeted to counter the Viet Cong Infrastructure.

## **Communist Administrative Structure in South Vietnam**

### **Design and Concept**

The formation of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam was announced by Radio Hanoi on December 20, 1960.<sup>1</sup> The National Liberation Front of South Vietnam was designed in accordance with Hanoi's doctrine of adapting politics, military strategy, and tactics to political objectives, such as the implication that the struggle in South Vietnam was an indigenous "war of liberation."

The National Liberation Front was an umbrella organization for the insurgency, embracing various fronts, parties, and an alternate government to the Government of Vietnam. Several organizational units emerged from the National Liberation Front including the People's Revolutionary Party on January 1, 1962 (actually the southern branch of the Lao Dong Party), the Central Office of South Vietnam in March 1962, and the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of Vietnam in 1969. The People's Security Service, under the direct control of the Ministry of Public Security in Hanoi, maintained links between these organizations by inserting its own members in key positions for surveillance and to discipline members and sympathizers.

Providing current secret intelligence to Hanoi and Lao Dong-People's Revolutionary Party leaders, but operating independently from the National Liberation Front, was Hanoi's

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1. "Hanoi and South Vietnam's 'Liberation Front'," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 02, Folder 08, Item Number: 2310208009. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/103513](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/103513). See also "Party in Revolution," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 04—Political Settlement, Box 02, Folder 04, Item Number: 2300204001. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/230/2300204001.pdf>; and Zasloff, *The Role of North Vietnam in the Southern Insurgency*, 9.



Central Research Agency. Originating during the war against the French, the Central Research Agency kept agents in the south and in foreign countries to collect intelligence. Together, the leaders and agents of these organizations along with their subordinate units made up the VCI with links via various channels to the Liberation Army regular forces, regional forces, and local guerrilla units.

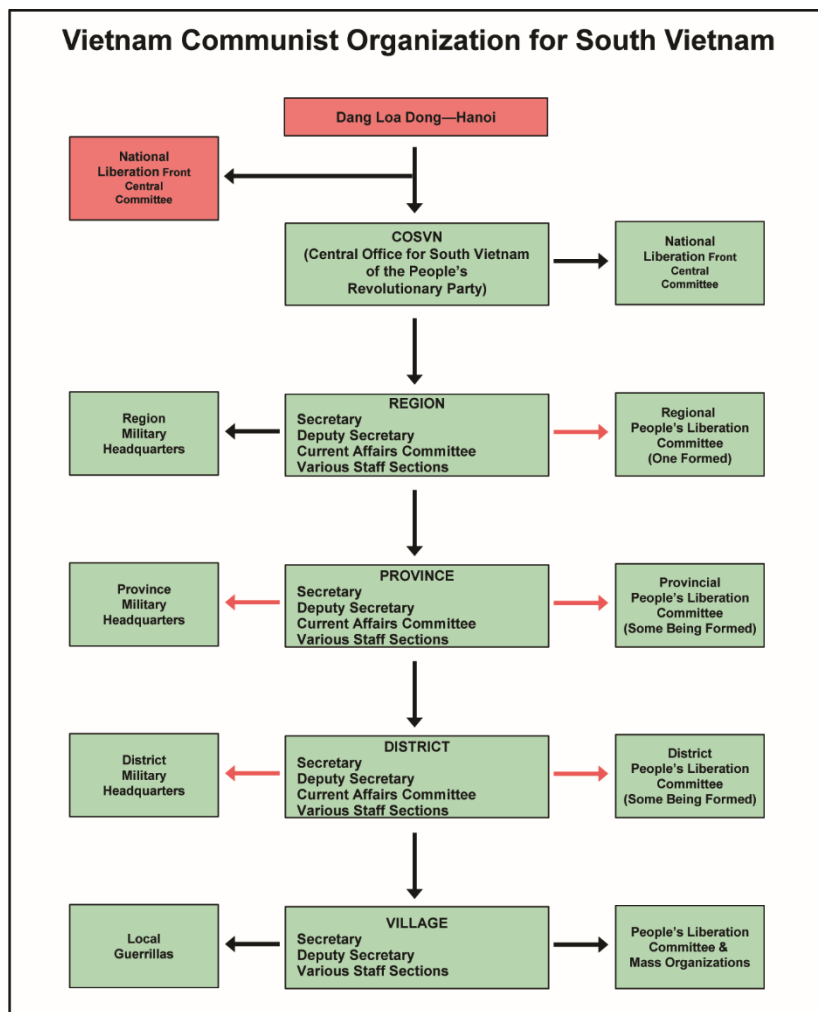
The military aspects of Communist organizational development, however, took second place to political organization, at least until 1964. Essentially, Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap and President Ho Chi Minh orchestrated the use of social-military concepts to maintain control through paramilitary guerrilla activities. Douglas Pike's excellent book written while Vietnam was still ongoing, *Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam*, states as follows:

Just as we overrate the military significance of revolutionary warfare so do we underrate its power as a social force. The contribution of Mao-Giap to sociological theory is a set of instructions on how to mobilize people into a potent force, which includes military force, for political purposes under circumstances in which one does not have the controls available ordinary rulers embarked on creating a nationwide political-military establishment.<sup>2</sup>

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2. Pike, *Viet Cong*, 51. See also Douglas Pike, "The Viet-Cong Strategy of Terror," (Saigon: United States Mission, Viet-Nam, February 1970. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/star/images/212/2121506008a.pdf>

Table 4. Vietnam Communist Organization for South Vietnam.



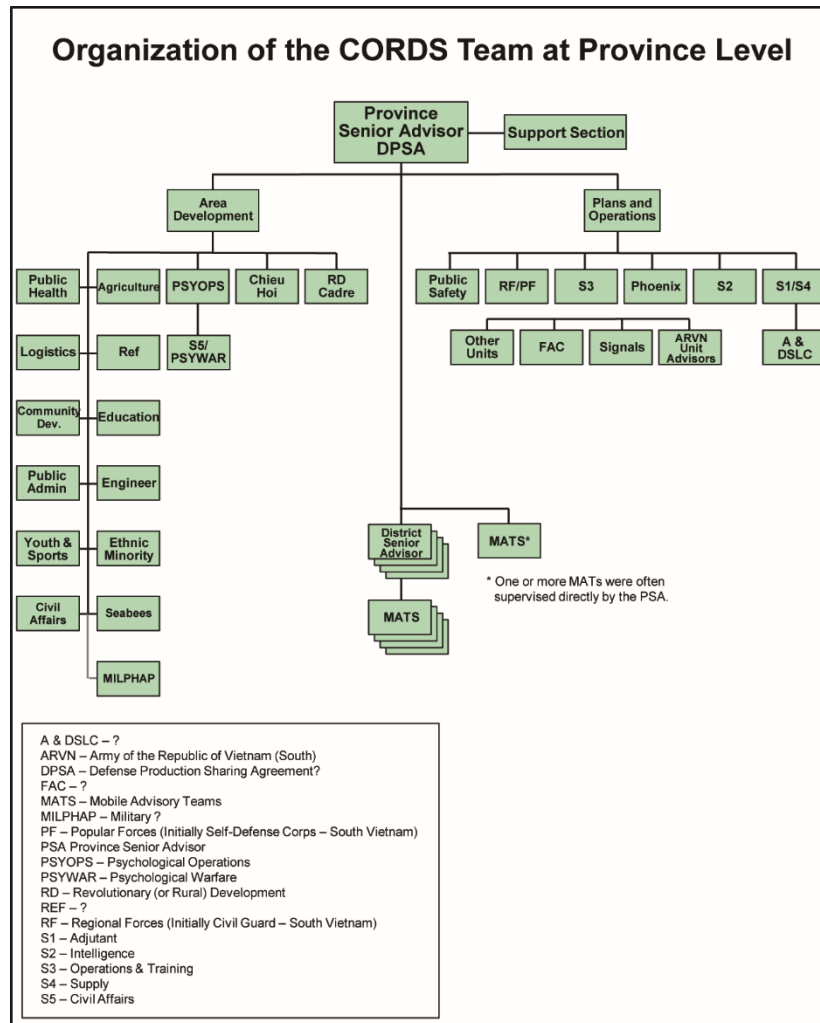
Source: *The Viet Cong Infrastructure* (Saigon: United States Mission in Vietnam, June 1970), 5

This does not deny the importance of Viet Cong guerrilla and terrorist activities but rather suggests that these were political rather than military in focus. However, these terrorist and military activities occupied the attention of both South Vietnam's and the United States' governments, particularly the US military. The threat to security, and hence political stability in the south, was the real result of Viet Cong infrastructure organization, but the military aspects were the prime target of the Government of Vietnam and the United States. The year 1957 did see a revision of US strategy in the form of the CORDS staff, to include an organized effort against the Viet Cong infrastructure, but the major effort remained militarily dominated and

oriented. This skewing of strategy permitted the Communist organizations to function effectively despite military setbacks.<sup>3</sup> As long as the Communist organizations could survive or expand the insurgency in the south, the war would continue.

## National Liberation Front

Table 5. Organization of the CORDS Team at Province Level.



Source: Ngo Quang Trung, *RVNAF and US Operational Cooperation and Coordination* (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1980), 154.

3. In an attempt to take advantage of the political and military chaos which followed the *coup d'etat* against South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem on November 1, 1963, Hanoi recognized that the National Liberation Front guerrillas were not capable of achieving the desired goal of finishing the war quickly and made the decision to send regular units of the North Vietnamese Army south. For an informative perspective of the actions and mistakes made by the South Vietnamese and their American allies in countering the Viet Cong, see William E. Colby, "The Nature of Revolutionary War." Speech to the National War College, 8 November 1971, Declassified November 1973. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/044/0440224001.pdf>.

Formed on December 20, 1960, after two years of intensive covert organizational preparation, the National Liberation Front represented Hanoi's first overt effort to create a political paramilitary and military organization in the south. It was the first vehicle by which the liberation struggle would be waged while enabling the northern-based Lao Dong Party to deny its controlling role, personnel, and covert actions.

There was little difficulty in forming the National Liberation Front since a trained network of 10,000 hardcore Communist Lao Dong agents remained in the south. As early as 1959, these clandestine infiltrators were aided by an ever-growing influx of agents from the north. Initially made up of former southerners who had been rigorously trained since 1954, they had established excellent communications, intelligence, propaganda, and paramilitary networks. Indeed, the National Liberation Front became a front organization but, unlike most front organizations elsewhere, had a military structure.<sup>4</sup> In its formation, the National Liberation Front was also unique when compared to the merger of political parties which constituted the popular fronts of Europe in the 1930s. The National Liberation Front created paper organizations which later became real subordinate fronts, such as the Youth, Women's, and Farmers' Fronts.<sup>5</sup> The National Liberation Front set up these skeleton organizations to give the appearance of support from among workers, religious orders, soldiers, youth, women, farmers, and intellectuals in South Vietnam. The broad spectrum of persons added prestige to the National Liberation Front; in addition, it was intended to win active public support. Reports on the structure of the

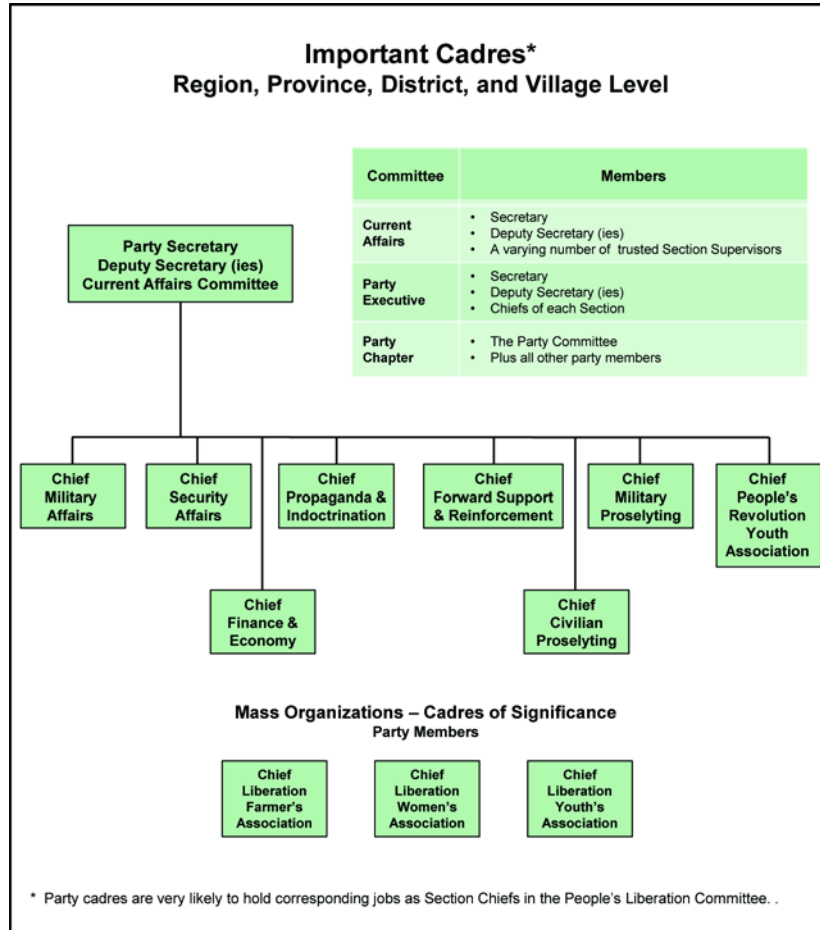
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4. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), "The Organization Activities and Objectives of the Communist Front in South Vietnam," Memorandum, 7 September 1966. Declassified November 1993. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/041/04111140001a.pdf>; and <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP79T00472A000800010024-4.pdf>. See also Douglas Pike, *War, Peace and the Viet Cong* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1969), 2.

5. "The Viet Cong: The Front Technique," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 08, Folder 11, Item Number: 2310811003, April 1967. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/231/2310811003.pdf>.

organizations affiliated with the National Liberation Front clearly suggest that the secretaries of the various committees were members of the Lao Dong Party,<sup>6</sup> which later surfaced as the People's Revolutionary Party.

Table 6. Important Cadres:  
Region, Province, Districts, and Village Level.



Source: *The Viet Cong Infrastructure* (Saigon: United States Mission in Vietnam, June 1970), 7

In its formation, the National Liberation Front was also unique when compared to the merger of political parties which constituted the popular fronts of Europe in the 1930s. The

6. For a highly detailed and informative examination of the Communist's infrastructure in South Vietnam, see Conley, "The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure in South Vietnam," Vol. I, 5.

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### **Political Power Programs**

The National Liberation Front Central Committee and Presidium were formed and dominated by northern Lao Dong agents.<sup>9</sup> The Central Committee and Presidium, established in 1960, was the head unit of the operational framework completed in order to organize the masses of the southern population. The rest of the operational organization was to consist of a variety of political parties and a broad spectrum of fronts designed to encompass all segments of Vietnamese society in a political paramilitary struggle for absolute power.

Political power was the National Liberation Front's objective. The National Liberation Front purported to be the sole, genuine, legitimate representative of the South Vietnamese people, and it labeled the Saigon government "rebel" and illegitimate.<sup>10</sup> In an interview with a

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7. "The Viet Cong: The Front Technique."

8. For a highly detailed and informative examination of the Communist's infrastructure in South Vietnam, see Conley, "The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure in South Vietnam," Vol. I, 5.

9. For information on the establishment of the National Front and those comprising its leadership, see "The NLF Command Structure" (incomplete), Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 08, Folder 10, Item Number: 2310810006, 1966. See also Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 234–35.

10. "Hanoi Control of the Viet Cong Under General Nguyen Chi Thanh," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 06, Folder 14, Item Number: 2310614020, 18 March 1967. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/231/>

London *Daily Worker* journalist, reprinted in the North Vietnamese magazine *Viet Nam Courier*, July 15, 1965, Ho Chi Minh described the National Liberation Front objectives:

The program of the South Viet Nam National Liberation Front clearly specified its principal aims. These are: to struggle against aggressive U.S. imperialism, to liberate the South, to achieve independence, democracy, peace, and neutrality, and advance step by step toward the reunification of the country. The South Viet Nam National Front for Liberation is an organization of the patriotic movement, set up by the mass of the people. The Front is the leader, the organizer of the South Vietnamese people's struggle against U.S. imperialism to recover independence. The Front is the only genuine representative of the South Vietnamese people. It is the sacred duty of the whole people of Viet Nam to support the South Vietnamese People's liberation struggle, waged under the leadership of the National Front for Liberation. We (DRV) respect the policies of the Front and hold that the two zones must take their respective characteristics into account, understand each other, restore normal relations between them and gradually achieve national reunification. Viet Nam is one. The Vietnamese are one people. Our entire people have the duty of opposing foreign aggression and defending the Fatherland.

To extend its popular appeal, the 1960 National Liberation Front program included the following points:

- Help for industrialists and traders;
- Rehabilitation of agriculture;

- Provision of jobs for the unemployed;
- Modernization of farming;
- Improvement of living conditions for workers and public employees;
- Protection of orphans, the elderly, and the disabled;
- Relief for localities suffering from crop failures, fire, and natural calamities;
- A guarantee to country folk and urban persons of the opportunity to earn their living in security;
- Protection of the legitimate right of ownership by peasants of the plots of land distributed to them;
- Elimination of illiteracy;
- A policy of assistance to families of poor army men, plus other acts of benevolence.

Also included among these provisions and guarantees was the confiscation of lands owned by US “imperialists and their agents,” and the promise to “promulgate all democratic freedoms.” Included, as well, was a pledge “to support national liberation struggles of peoples in other countries.”<sup>11</sup>

In 1967, the 1960 program was revised. In its most authoritative pronouncement of objectives, a 7,500 word document listed the four major planks: to save the nation (from U.S.

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11. Quoted in Pike, *War, Peace and the Viet Cong*, 4. For a more objective perspective on the goals and techniques of the NVA/VC to win the war see “Hanoi’s Strategy for Conquest—The Liberation Front,” Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 01, Folder 11, Item Number: 2310614020, 21 June 1965. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/231/2310111006.pdf>. Although used as a rallying point in support of both the Viet Cong and communist propaganda to bring diverse ethnic minorities to their side, Vietnam was most definitely not made up of one people. To better understand the makeup of the multi-ethnic country called Vietnam, see “Ethnographic Data About Selected Groups in the Republic of Vietnam, North Vietnam, Laos, and the Khmer Republic Relevant to the Recovery of Missing Personnel,” Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, George J. Veith Collection, Box 12, Folder 15, Item Number: 3671215021, 1 March 1973. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/367/3671215021.pdf>.



aggressors); to work for reunification of the fatherland; to build an independent, democratic, peaceful, neutral, and prosperous Vietnam; and to apply a foreign policy of peace and neutrality.

The third plank was broken down into fourteen concrete policies:

- To establish a progressive government;
- To develop the economy;
- To institute land reform;
- To promote education, culture, science, technology, and public health;
- To improve working conditions;
- To develop the armed forces;
- To provide veterans' benefits;
- To establish equality of the sexes;
- To provide social welfare benefits;
- To integrate minorities;
- To guarantee religious freedom;
- To implement an amnesty program;
- To protect the rights of absent Vietnamese;
- To protect the rights of foreigners in Vietnam.<sup>12</sup>

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12. Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 234–35. For a translation of the political program of the National Liberation Front, see Turner, Annex L, 427–42. For regulations of the National Liberation Front, see Conley, *The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure*, Vol. I, 99–122. For the US reaction to the Viet Cong program, see W. W. Rostow, “Viet Cong Program,” Memorandum to President Lyndon B. Johnson, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Veteran Members of the 109th Quartermaster Company (Air Delivery) Collection, Box 01, Folder 39, Item Number: 0010139011, September 4, 1967. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/001/0010139011.pdf>. For an excellent comparison between the 1960 and 1967 National Liberation Front programs listing changes in the goals, programs, and nature of the government envisioned by the leadership in Hanoi after unification, see M. T. Haggard, “Comparison of the 1960 and 1967 Platforms for the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam,” Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 02, Folder 09, Item Number: 2310209002, October 20, 1967. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2\\_digital\\_objects/103577](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2_digital_objects/103577).

## Political Parties

Beginning in 1905, a bewildering number of parties, groups, united fronts, etc., fought for control in a divided Vietnam. The sheer number of these organizations does not testify to the vigor of the various nationalist movements, but rather demonstrated the inability of its various leaders to agree on aims and tactics; to create strong, united organizations; and to subordinate their personal ambitions and prejudices to the need for united action. As an example of the ephemeral nature of these groups the New Vietnam Revolutionary Party, was created in 1925 giving rise to a separate Communists group, the Dong Duong Cong San Lien Doan (Indochina Communist Alliance) which later helped found the Indochina Communists Party in August of 1929, after dissidents from Tonkin and Annam quarreled with the Revolutionary Youth Association at a reunification meeting in Hong Kong and set up their own organization. Its various programs reflected those of the National Liberation Front.<sup>13</sup> Then, in January 1962, the People's Revolutionary Party (Party of the Working Class) was created as "the party of patriotic, democratic, and progressive intellectuals, and industrialists in South Vietnam," with the assignment "in the present phase to struggle to achieve the NFLSVN objectives. . . ."<sup>14</sup> The Radical Socialist Party was identical to the North Vietnam Socialist Party, as was the new Democratic Party, which was a copy of its northern namesake.<sup>15</sup> Finally, Liberation Radio went on the air in 1968, and a Liberation Red Cross was formed.

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13. Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, 1234–53. See also Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 231.

14. Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, 1234–53. See also CIA, "The Organization Activities and Objectives of the Communist Front in South Vietnam" 12.

15. Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 232. The shadow governments were formed and led by the administration Liberation Committees and not the Liberation associations. See also Pike, *Viet Cong*, 112–14; and CIA, "The Communist Liberation Committees in South Vietnam," Memorandum, 4 November 1968; and Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, 1234–53.

The associations, or fronts, were active at the national, interzone, zone, province, district, and village levels. In a liberated area, they sought to serve as an overt government, and in contested or Government of Vietnam-controlled areas, they formed shadow governments.

The National Liberation Front Central Committee, with its affiliated parties, acted as the policy and strategy forming level. As early as 1961, the National Liberation Front began concentrating on organizing at the province, district, and village levels. Associations, specifically for farmers, students, women, youth, and urban workers were set up.<sup>16</sup> At the village level, peasants were organized into a number of functional liberation associations, the most important of which were the Peasants' Liberation Association (Hoi Nong Dan Giai Phong), the Women's Liberation Association (Hoi Phu Nu Giai Phong), the Liberation Youth Association (Hoi Thanh Nien Giai Phong), the Association of Liberation Students and School Children (Hoi Lien Kiep Sinh Vien, Hoi Sinh Giai Phong), and the Liberation Cultural Association (Hoi Van Nghe Giai Phong). Additionally, a number of professional associations were created for journalists, businessmen, physicians, and other professionals.<sup>17</sup>

Ascertaining the actual membership in National Liberation Front organizations is difficult. Statistics on Vietnam are varied, conflicting, and changing. Many scholars have for these reasons avoided statistical analysis. However, Douglas Pike in *War, Peace and the Viet Cong*, estimates that the National Liberation Front had, as late as 1968, approximately ten to fifteen percent support, including hardcore supporters as well as sympathizers. Pike also notes

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16. "Party in Revolution." See also CIA, "The Communist Liberation Committees in South Vietnam," 2.

17. "Party in Revolution," 232. See also Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 232–33.

that as Buddhist opposition to the Government of Vietnam increased, National Liberation Front sympathizers decreased in number.<sup>18</sup>

### **Village-Level Politics**

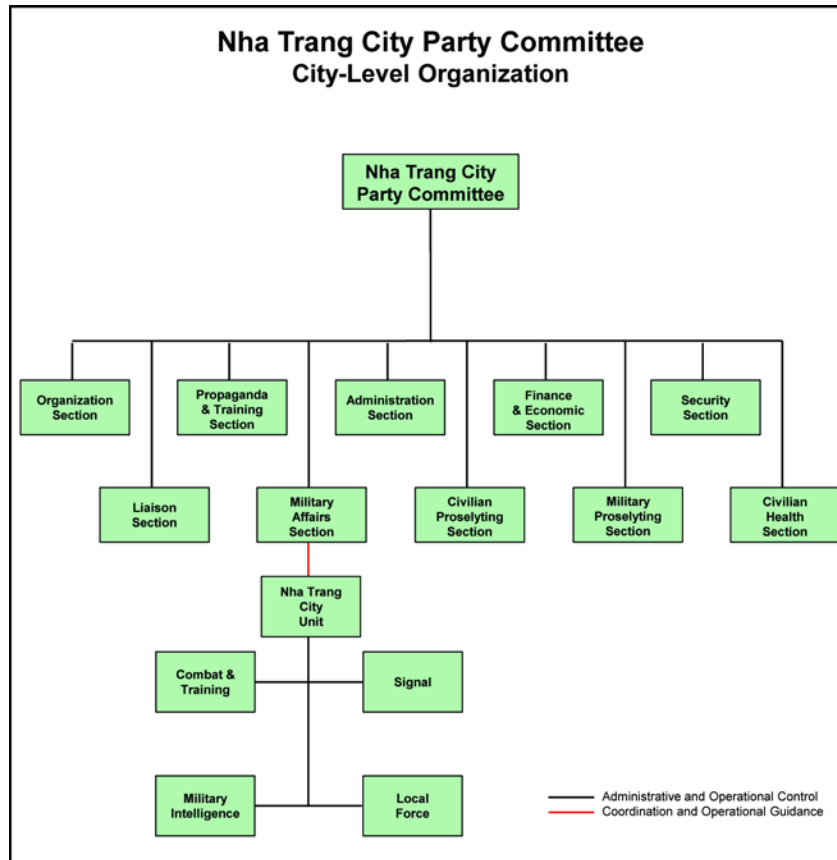
The rationale for the National Liberation Front concentration on village organization was basically that the peasants lived in the villages, and it was at the village level that the Saigon government had either neglected or failed to develop and properly staff popular socio-political organizations.<sup>19</sup> The National Liberation Front moved in on the villages and assumed control. This was made relatively easy because the peasants' personal commitments were not based on circumstances or tradition. Recognizing this, the Viet Cong infrastructure developed two parallel programs. The first was to make the South Vietnamese Government, not the village population, the propaganda enemy. Thus, the Government of Vietnam was forced to make its own survival the priority objective, and support to the local population a secondary priority. As for the people, particularly the peasants, the Communists developed and relied on superb organization at the very lowest level.

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18. "Increasing Number of Defectors from Viet Cong Ranks," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 17, Folder 05, Item Number: 2311705010, 19 February 1967. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2311705010.pdf>. See also Pike, *War, Peace and the Viet Cong*, 6.

19. "Development of PLAF Covert Agents in My Tho Province," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 15, Folder 06, Item Number: 2311506034, January 1971. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2311506034.pdf>. See also Pike, *Viet Cong*, 52, 54, 57–71, 92–94.

Table 7. Nha Trang City Party Committee:  
City-Level Organization.



Source: *The Viet Cong Infrastructure* (Saigon: United States Mission in Vietnam, June 1970), 44.

The recruitment and training of guerrillas was, in fact, one of the first steps toward establishing a revolutionary organization in the villages. One of the first, largest, and most important and enduring of these Communist organizations was the Farmers Liberation Association (Nong Hoi), or simply the Farmers' Association. For security purposes, this group had a cellular structure consisting of a Communist leader and two or more peasant members. The cell nucleus had the objective of suborning the peasants by controlling their primary activity, agricultural production, their only means of existence.<sup>20</sup>

20. "Program and Summary of the Regulations of the Liberated Farmers Association," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 10, Folder 07, Item Number: 2311007003, December 15, 1961. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/231/>

The key elements of this shadow government involved an upward chain of command:

1. At the top, the National Liberation Front Central Committee, which was responsible for policy planning and supervision of organizational expansion.
2. Three interzone headquarters, where after 1963 agitation/propaganda policy was determined, with agitation/propaganda teams responsible for indoctrination and training of the population.
3. Seven geographical zones, in effect, sub offices for the interzones, existing mainly because travel and communication barriers did not easily permit administrative directives directly between the interzone headquarters and the province committees.
4. Some 30 (later 43) provincial committees, the chief operational units of the National Liberation Front, with the task of administering the liberation associations and assigning military duties to local guerrilla units.<sup>21</sup>
5. The lower echelons—district, village, and city committees and organizations carrying out the political struggle, the military task of proselytization, and the armed struggle.<sup>22</sup>

The support that the National Liberation Front generated was rarely ideological. Rather, it was of social motivation. Both social pressure and Viet Cong coercion caused young men and women to join the ranks of the National Liberation Front army, and social pressure ensured their

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2311007003.pdf. See also: R. Michael Pearce, *The Insurgent Environment* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1969), 33–42.

21. Department of the Army, DA Pamphlet 360-518, “Know Your Enemy: The Viet Cong” (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 8 March 1966), 3–21. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/239/2390816001.pdf>, The monograph goes into great detail on the organizational structure stating that while the “organization seems cumbersome and the chain of command indirect and slow, in contrast to orthodox military practice of establishing a direct military chain of command from top to bottom. However, the Viet Cong’s political and military structure conforms to the classic Communist pattern of strong central authority at the top and operations at lower level decentralized, with Communist Party control over the government at all levels, and political control over the military at all levels.”

22. Department of the Army, DA Pamphlet 360-518, “Know Your Enemy: The Viet Cong,” 3–21, See also Pike, *Viet Cong*, 113.

loyalty. Moreover, the Viet Cong had controlled areas of South Vietnam for a generation, and in the villages, the local leaders were obeyed and even protected.

The village level was the lowest echelon with any decision-making authority and at the lowest party level. Leadership was generally in the hands of a single People's Revolutionary Party member with an Executive Committee of five to seven members and from three to a dozen branches. Members lived in the various hamlets constituting the village, and they provided the party's "link to the masses."<sup>23</sup>

By 1957, the Party was primarily occupied with two major problems: political control of the National Liberation Front military army and implementation of the political struggle by means of military and civilian proselytizing activities. Political commissars, all People's Revolutionary Party members, were found in all National Liberation Front units and fronts as controlling but not commanding officials. The entire struggle was controlled by the People's Revolutionary Party agents working through the National Liberation Front, which served as a front for public activities.<sup>24</sup> The party thus became the decisive channel of the organization. From it preceded direction, control, and supervision, and only within its councils were policy and strategy planned.<sup>25</sup>

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23. "Organization of the Viet Cong Infrastructure," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 08, Folder 13, Item Number: 2310813012, June 1968. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/231/2310813012.pdf>. 1–8. See also Pike, *Viet Cong*, 147; MACV, "Viet Cong Infrastructure 1–17.

24. Pike, *Viet Cong*, 148. To understand what was entailed to strengthen the insurgent cell structure from the point of view of a participant, see "Vietnamese Communist Documents on Strengthening Communist Cells in South Vietnam," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 30, Folder 004, Item Number: 23130004002, 1 January 1957. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/231/23130004002.pdf>. For a more detailed description of the functions and authority of the Political Office (Commissar), see M. Anderson, et al., *Insurgent Organization and Operations: A Case Study in the Delta, 1964-1966* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 1967), 19–41. [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_memoranda/2005/RM5239-1.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_memoranda/2005/RM5239-1.pdf).

25. See also Pike, *Viet Cong*, 148.

Although the villagers' attitudes toward the National Liberation Front deteriorated to outright dislike or worse, the villages continued to support the National Liberation Front from 1962 to 1973. The explanation for this lies in the organizational strength of the Viet Cong infrastructure. The National Liberation Front never sought to rely on the voluntary support of the population but instead sought to control the population for the National Liberation Front's own objectives.<sup>26</sup> The Viet Cong infrastructure offered the people one choice: either to incur the active enmity of the Viet Cong infrastructure or not to cooperate with the Government of Vietnam. As the Viet Cong infrastructure organizations expanded, most Viet Cong violence was designed to achieve desired effects by punishing anti-Viet Cong or pro-Government of Vietnam activities, thus providing an example to others.<sup>27</sup>

It was at the village level that the National Liberation Force faced its chief organizational challenge. A mass movement had to be created, drawing from a body of distrusting and reluctant farmers who had nonetheless been recruited, energized, and controlled.<sup>28</sup> To meet this challenge, from its inception through 1964, the National Liberation Front employed functional liberation associations such as the Farmers' Liberation Association, Youth Liberation Association, Women's Liberation Association, and the like. These fleshed out the fronts created in conjunction with the National Liberation Front. Each of the fronts was guided and controlled at every level by an administrative liberation association. The associations were elite, narrow, and

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26. "The Viet Cong Political Infrastructure in South Vietnam," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 05, Folder 07, Item Number: 2310507002, 31 October 1972, 45. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/231/2310507002a.pdf>. See also Pike, *Viet Cong*, 6–7.

27. "The Viet Cong Political Infrastructure in South Vietnam," 41–45. See also Pearce, *The Insurgent Environment*, 38–42.

28. "Civilian Proselyting Activities of the Cai Nuoc District Party Committee, VC Ca Mau Province, VC Region 3," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 15, Folder 09, Item Number: 2311409001, 5 May 1971. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/231/2311409001.pdf>. See also Pike, *Viet Cong*, 112.



structurally hierarchical, branching out of the National Liberation Front Central Committee via a number of intervening administrative levels (zone, province, and district) to the administrative Village Liberation Committee. Each level was controlled by hardcore Lao Dong Party members, constituting the 1964 Viet Cong shadow government of Vietnam.<sup>29</sup>

“Know Your Enemy: The Viet Cong” goes into great detail on the organizational structure stating that while the “organization seems cumbersome and the chain of command indirect and slow, in contrast to the orthodox military practice of establishing a direct military chain of command from top to bottom. However, the Viet Cong’s political and military structure conforms to the classic Communist pattern of the strong central authority at the top and operations at lower level decentralized, with Communist Party control over the government at all levels, and political control over the military at all levels.”

The failure of American and South Vietnamese analysts to grasp the method of Viet Cong propaganda and organizational techniques led many decision makers to assume that the Viet Cong infrastructure was the enemy of the people and that given the opportunity, the people would revolt against the Viet Cong.<sup>30</sup> What the Government of Vietnam officialdom failed to understand was that the National Liberation Front could and did exploit the Government of Vietnam’s weakness at the district and village levels, focusing on the corruption and incompetence of local Government of Vietnam officials. In fact, the Government of Vietnam officials contributed to the disaffection of the peasantry by poorly planned and implemented

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29. Mark Moyer, “The War Against the Viet Cong Shadow Government,” Box 01, Folder 01, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Mark Moyer Collection, Box 01, Folder 01, Item Number: 1530101001, April 28, 2000. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/153/1530101001.pdf>. Moyer talks extensively about the efforts of the Phoenix Program to neutralize Viet Cong control of the villages through a shadow government and the effectiveness of the Provincial Reconnaissance Units, a relatively small paramilitary forces controlled by the CIA. See also Pike, *Viet Cong*, 112.

30. “The Viet Cong Political Infrastructure in South Vietnam,” 30–38. See also Pearce, *The Insurgent Environment*, 26–29, xi.

resettlement and land reform program, plus repressive measures against former Viet Minh guerrillas and their families.<sup>31</sup>

Furthermore, the Government of Vietnam's reaction to National Liberation Front policies was harsh and often indiscriminate, thus playing directly into National Liberation Front hands. According to a sample of peasants interviewed, the Government of Vietnam's most serious error was the promulgation of Law No. 10 in 1959, which highlighted the 1957–60 “denunciation of Communism” campaign instituted by the Ngo Dinh Diem government.<sup>32</sup> Under Law 10/59, the government became the sole interpreter of subversive activity and could choose its targets with impunity—a virtually unlimited hunting license. Anyone convicted of “acts of sabotage” or “infringements on national security” could be sentenced to death or life imprisonment with no appeal.<sup>33</sup>

The primary Government of Vietnam targets were former Viet Minh guerrillas—many of whom were nationalists, not Communists—regardless of whether or not they were known to have participated in subversive activities. This insensitive implementation of Law 10/59 further alienated the peasants from the Government of Vietnam, for many peasants viewed the former guerrillas as heroes of the anti-French war.

Between 1953 and 1960, in response to Law 10/59, extensive North Vietnamese propaganda was directed at exploiting the Government of Vietnam's errors and heavy-

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31. Don E. Seeley, “Elements of an Integrated Strategy for Rural Security and Development,” (Menlo Park, CA: Stanford Research Institute, April 1969). <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/212/2121211005a.pdf>. See also Pearce, *The Insurgent Environment*, 29.

32. Ngo Dinh Diem, “Republic of Vietnam: Law No. 10/59 of May 6, 1959,” Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Michigan State University Archives & Historical Collections Wesley R. Fishel Papers, Box 1193, Folder 65, Item Number: 6-20-1FA-116-UA17-95\_001023, May 6, 1959. [https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/msu/6-20-1FA-116-UA17-95\\_001023.pdf](https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/msu/6-20-1FA-116-UA17-95_001023.pdf). See also Pearce, *The Insurgent Environment*, 33.

33. Diem, “Republic of Vietnam: Law No. 10/59 of May 6, 1959. See also Pearce, *The Insurgent Environment*, 33.

handedness, reactivating former Viet Minh, and recruiting young men to be trained as guerrillas for future activity.<sup>34</sup>

The recruiting of guerrillas and the establishment of Nong Hoi moved rapidly in remote areas outside Government of Vietnam influence since the hardcore infiltrator agents worked unhindered. In areas of Government of Vietnam influence or presence, the development of peasant support for the Viet Cong infrastructure proceeded slowly. When the Communist guerrillas began to make armed forays into Government of Vietnam areas, however, the magnitude of the Communist threat became apparent.<sup>35</sup>

The announcement in 1960 of the formation of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam accomplished two things. First, relating to the opposition facing President Ngo Dinh Diem, the National Liberation Front provided an alternate organization which spoke in nationalist terms and promised to remedy the excesses of the Diem regime. Second, it placed all the revolutionary-subversive activities of the numerous agent factotums in the south under the leadership of a single organization. From an estimated strength of 6,000 agents in 1957, National Liberation Front strength hovered around 25,000 in 1960, of which one-third was thought to be composed of regular guerrillas.<sup>36</sup> By early 1962, the cumulative National Liberation Front

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34. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 242–69. See also Pearce, *The Insurgent Environment*, 31–33.

35. “Viet Con Village Control: Some Observations on the Origin and Dynamics of Modern Revolutionary War,” Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, John Donnell Collection, Box 10, Folder 03, Item Number: 0721003001, 8 August 1969. See also Pearce, *The Insurgent Environment*, 33.

36. US Congress, U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Statistics on Vietnam War: 1970* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1965), 4. See also “Communist Indochina Military Forces,” Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03—Statistical Data, Box 43, Folder 12, Item Number: 2234312014, 1970. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/223/2234312014.pdf>. Estimates are tricky things, author Michael Clodfelter in *Vietnam in Military Statistics*, 40, states that excluding regional and village militia, Viet Cong main strength increased from 5,000 in 1959 to 10,000 in 1960 and to 12,000 in 1961, organized into 27 battalions. The Viet Cong main force was supported in 1961 by regional militia in 43 companies. By 1962, the VC numbered 20,000 regulars organized into 450-man battalions of four companies each. Three of these battalions were formed into the first Viet Cong regiment, the Main Force Liberation Regiment. It was based in War Zone D, a major Communist bastion northwest of Saigon. In late 1964, Viet Cong

membership stood at an estimated 500,000, where it remained until the fall of the Diem regime in November 1963, when it dropped 400,000–450,000. During 1965 and 1966, membership was probably between 250,000 and 300,000. The National Liberation Front, however, claimed as of December 19, 1963, that it had 750 organizations and 7,000,000 members.<sup>37</sup> Further, by mid-1964, Viet Cong armed forces in South Vietnam were estimated to comprise 50,000 to 60,000 regular troops, about one-half of them trained in North Vietnam, plus perhaps 80,000 to 120,000 local guerrillas.<sup>38</sup>

### **Limitations on National Liberation Front Success**

One of the significant developments, in both the National Liberation Front and in the organizations which it generated, was the drain on the limited number of Lao Dong hardcore agents in the south. This manpower drain led to Hanoi's takeover, or regularization, of the National Liberation Front. From mid-1963 to the end of 1965, large numbers of replacement agents began infiltrating from North Vietnam.<sup>39</sup> The new agents ascertained Hanoi's domination of the southern organizations of not only the National Liberation Front but all affiliated political parties, associations, and allied groups. This takeover, implementing the weeding out of the

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strength totaled 26,700 main force troops in 50 battalions, backed by 80,000 regional militiamen in 140 companies. Viet Cong companies usually numbered 85 men; battalions were about 350–450 strong.

37. Pike, *Viet Cong*, 115. See also Clodfelter in *Vietnam in Military Statistics*, 40. Accurate VC/NVA numbers are a matter of debate with multiple figures reported. A controversy developed within American military intelligence concerning the undercounting of VC/NVA by MACV G2. To better understand the difficulty of determining enemy order-of-battle statistics see "Intelligence to Please? The Order of Battle Controversy During the Vietnam War," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Glenn Helm Collection, Box 16, Folder 08, Item Number: 071608001, no date. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/107/1071608001.pdf>. In contrast, at the height of the war on April 30, 1968, there were roughly 540,000 American troops in Vietnam. Of that total, only perhaps 60,000 were rifle-carrying, frontline soldiers. At any given point, less than 40,000 of that 60,000 were actually in the field, at risk and seeking contact with the enemy.

38. CIA, "Strength of Viet Cong Military Forces in South Vietnam," 15 March 1965, 3. CIA-RDP79T00472A000400030014-0 and <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docsCIA-RDP79T00472A000400030014-0.pdf>. Declassified October 10, 2010. See also an interview with Bernard B. Fall, cited in *U.S. News and World Report*, (September 26, 1964): 62; and John G. Norris, "Troop Flow from Hanoi Up Sharply," *Washington Post*, (January 27, 1965); A-1, A-5. Mid-1965 estimates were 100,000 guerrillas and 46,000 regulars.

39. Pike, *Viet Cong*, 116.

unreliable agents was continued throughout the war.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, all military units were under Hanoi's control.

### **The People's Revolutionary Party**

The People's Revolutionary Party was a direct outgrowth of inherent flaws in the National Liberation Front organizational and operational structure. From Hanoi's point of view, the National Liberation Front suffered from severe problems. First, the appeal of the National Liberation Front was designed to be broad enough to attract dissident southern nationalists who might not favor reunification with the North. Second, the National Liberation Front organizational structure and membership had expanded rapidly, and consequently, discipline and leadership needs had outrun the capabilities and resources of the southern Lao Dong Party agents. Third, as the armed struggle increased, Hanoi had to consolidate direction and control of the insurgency in the south.

By 1961, the situation had become urgent, because guerrilla operations had expanded under the auspices of the National Liberation Front as the National Liberation Front Liberation Army. Since the army and the party formed a dual system, political control of the armed struggle, as well as of the National Liberation Front, was essential. Consequently, all policies, strategies, and operations became the responsibility of the newly created People's Revolutionary Party, which maintained its ideological purity by remaining a separate organization within the National Liberation Front with its own communications and command structure. The People's Revolutionary Party was, in fact, the southern branch of the Lao Dong Party.<sup>41</sup>

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40. Pike, *Viet Cong*, 116.

41. P. J. Honey, "North Vietnam's Workers' Party and South Vietnam's People's Revolutionary Party," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Winter, 1962-1963): 375-83. See also Pike, *Viet Cong* 137-39. For a list of Vietnamese Political Parties, see Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, 1234-53.

On January 1, 1962, the People's Revolutionary Party was officially organized. Radio Hanoi quoted the *Liberation News Agency* of January 13, 1962, to the effect that the People's Revolutionary Party was formed in late December 1961 by a "conference of Marxist-Leninists meeting in South Vietnam . . . under the guidance of veteran revolutionaries."<sup>42</sup> The People's Revolutionary Party never denied its Communist nature. Nor did it deny that it was more than merely an equal member unit of the National Liberation Front. It was, it insisted, "The vanguard of the National Liberation Front, the paramount member."<sup>43</sup> The People's Revolutionary Party considered itself to be the reinforcing steel spine of the National Liberation Front organization.<sup>44</sup>

The Lao Dong Party in the south had remained a covert organization from 1954 to 1962. Coincidental with the public formation of the People's Revolutionary Party in 1962, the Lao Dong Party began a rapid organizational expansion, and while the People's Revolutionary Party denied its official ties with Hanoi, it nonetheless used the Lao Dong communications network to Hanoi.

In 1963, Hanoi established "The Committee for Supervision of the South," with administrative supervision of the People's Revolutionary Party.<sup>45</sup> In fact, a memorandum circulated among National Liberation Force agents at the time of the People's Revolutionary Party's formation stating that the revolutionary movement in the south lacked organization and leadership and that the People's Revolutionary Party was the paramount organization to fill this

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42. Honey, "North Vietnam's Workers' Party," 375–83. See also Pike, *Viet Cong*, 137.

43. Honey, "North Vietnam's Workers' Party," 375–83. See also Pike, *Viet Cong*, 137.

44. Honey, "North Vietnam's Workers' Party," 375–83. See also Pike, *Viet Cong*, 137–39.

45. Honey, "North Vietnam's Workers' Party," 375–83. See also Pike, *Viet Cong*, 139; "Hanoi's Organization of Control in the South," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 07, Folder 01, Item Number: 2310701041, October 1972; and *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 242–69.

role.<sup>46</sup> It is also interesting to note that in April 1962, the Central Committee of the People's Revolutionary Party issued a foreign policy statement damning the US presence and lauding the Democratic Republic of Vietnam; Chinese, Russian, and Communist bloc support; as well as demanding implementation of elections under the 1954 Geneva Accords.<sup>47</sup> This declaration had the overtones of a government coming into being, and it set the stage for the subsequent emergence of the Provisional Revolutionary Government.

The organizational structure of the People's Revolutionary Party was independent of but meshed with the National Liberation Front structure it controlled. There were, however, two exceptions. First, a classic Communist cell structure linked individual members. Second, a separate chain of command was created for urban areas, similar to but separate from the rural chain of command.<sup>48</sup>

Initially, part or all of the People's Revolutionary Party headquarters for the Central Committee, and probably most of the National Liberation Front, was located in the famed Zone D area north of Saigon in the Binh Duong Province. There were also reports that the People's Revolutionary Party National Liberation Front leadership spent much or most of its time in another headquarters just inside the Cambodian border, west of Hau Nghia Province. The confusion was heightened when a joint US-Government of Vietnam military operation overran the Zone D headquarters in January 1966, capturing nearly 6,000 documents. The idea took hold that the actual headquarters directing the insurgency was located in Cambodia and went by name of the Central Office, South Vietnam.<sup>49</sup>

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46. CIA, "The Organization, Activities, and Objectives of the Communist Front in South Vietnam." See also Pike, *Viet Cong*, 139.

47. Pike, *Viet Cong*, 139.

48. "Organization of the Viet Cong Infrastructure," 1–8. See also Pike, *Viet Cong*, 41–42.

49. "How Hanoi Controls The Vietcong," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Other Manuscripts—American Friends of Vietnam, Box 09, Folder 14, Item Number: 1780914001, 11

Whatever the case may be, the National Liberation Force, People's Revolutionary Party, and the various fronts and alliances shared one command structure. It appears probable that after 1966, the Central Office of South Vietnam was located in a safe haven in Cambodia and that the instructions emanating from the Central Office of South Vietnam were those of the People's Revolutionary Party.

The People's Revolutionary Party Central Committee had three functions: first, provide direction for the National Liberation Front; second, provide general administration; and third, the increasingly important responsibility of the military-political commissar.<sup>50</sup> This latter responsibility took on major importance as the military phase expanded rapidly, beginning in 1964 with a large increase in arms and infiltrators from the north.<sup>51</sup>

While the National Liberation Front army and guerrilla forces were controlled by the People's Revolutionary Party, the North Vietnamese army units, or People's Army of Vietnam, operating in South Vietnam, retained their own chain of command direct from Hanoi.<sup>52</sup> The administration and guidance at People's Revolutionary Party headquarters were divided among a number of sections, including economic and financial units as well as vital security, intelligence, counterintelligence, communication, and liaison functions.

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January 1968. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/178/1780914001.pdf>. See also "Hanoi's Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) A Background Paper," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 06, Folder 05, Item Number: 2310605043, July 1969. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/231/2310605043.pdf>. See also Pike, *Viet Cong*, 145–46.

50. "The Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Viet-Nam," Part 1, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 08, Folder 15, Item Number: 2310815010, 1969. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/231/2310815010.pdf>. See also Pike, *Viet Cong*, 137.

51. "The Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Viet-Nam," Part 1. See also Pike, *Viet Cong*, 147; and Barton Whaley, *Guerrilla Communications* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Center for International Studies, 1967), 101–12.

52. Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics*, 40. Estimates before 1964 the National Liberation Front main forces numbered approximately 10,000 and nearly 20,000 guerrillas. However, 1964 saw a rapid buildup to 26,700 main force and about 80,000 paramilitary forces. Also, about one-half of the National Liberation Front civilian agents were either regrouped southerners or pure northerners. See also Pike, *Viet Cong*, 324–25.



Complete centralization was inhibited by security, geography, and the National Liberation Front structure. An interzone unit was designed to decentralize these functions. Each interzone had a 21-man Central Committee which was essentially a conduit from People's Revolutionary Party headquarters to zones (regions) which might consist of two or more provinces.<sup>53</sup> As with the National Liberation Front, the Provincial Committee was the key link in the People's Revolutionary Party command chain, since it supervised policy implementation of district, village, and hamlet levels where the People's Revolutionary Party National Liberation Front was in direct contact with the population.<sup>54</sup>

The district- or city-level Central Committee was probably the most important lower level element of the People's Revolutionary Party. It oversaw all day-to-day activities in its area and had considerable latitude in its operations. Prior to 1964, it was the lowest operating level of the party.<sup>55</sup> After 1964, and certainly by 1967 when Phoenix (Phung Hoang) made its debut, the People's Revolutionary Party was well organized at the village and hamlet levels.

### **The Central Office for South Vietnam**

The original Central Office of South Vietnam was created by the Lao Dong Party in 1951 to replace the Nam Bo (Southern) Regional Party Committee to carry out party policy in Cochinchina during the war with the French. It was headed by Le Duan, with Le Due Tho as his deputy. This office was dissolved in 1954.<sup>56</sup>

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53. "Organization of the Viet Cong Infrastructure," 1-8. See also Pike, *Viet Cong*, 147; and MACV, "Viet Cong Infrastructure—Record of MACV Part 2," CICV Special Report No. 7 (San Francisco: Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff, Intelligence, 8 March 1966), 1-17. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/F0159/F015900210964.pdf>.

54. "Organization of the Viet Cong Infrastructure," 1-8. Pike, *Viet Cong*, 147. MACV, "Viet Cong Infrastructure, 1-17.

55. "Organization of the Viet Cong Infrastructure," 1-8. Pike, *Viet Cong*, 147. MACV, "Viet Cong Infrastructure, 1-17.

56. "Creation of the Central Office of South Viet-Nam and Abolishment of the Party Regional Committee of Nam-Bo," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 13—The Early History of Vietnam, Box 02, Folder 15, Item Number: 2410215018, June 1951. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/>

Prior to March 1962, South Vietnam had been divided into two interzones: Intersector V and Nam Bo. Each zone was responsible to the Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party in Hanoi. In March, they were made into a single operational headquarters—Central Office of South Vietnam. Supervision of the Central Office of South Vietnam was exercised through the Lao Dong’s Central Committee Reunification Department.<sup>57</sup> Further, the Central Office of South Vietnam headquarters was highly mobile and often geographically diversified, obviously for greater security of personnel.

After 1964, when Hanoi decided to escalate the fighting, one of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam’s two four-star senior generals, Nguyen Chi Thanh, a Politburo member, was sent south to assume command of the Central Office of South Vietnam. Thanh was killed in July 1967 and was replaced by another Politburo member, Pham Hung, an original member of the 1951 Central Office of South Vietnam and believed to be its head as late as 1973. At the time of General Thanh’s assignment, direct Central Office of South Vietnam communication with the Politburo in Hanoi was established.<sup>58</sup>

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reports/images.php?img=/images/241/2410215018.pdf. For a complete description of the Viet Cong infrastructure as of 1970, especially the National Liberation Front and the People’s Revolutionary Party, see MACV/MACCORDS, “Phung Hoang: Current Breakout of VCI Executives and Significant Cadres,” (413-01), Accession No. 334-77-0047, 18. (Referred to as the Green Book.) <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/star/images/044/0440317001.pdf>.

57. “How Hanoi Controls the Vietcong.” See also Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 241.

58. “Creation of the Central Office of South Viet-Nam and Abolishment of the Party Regional Committee of Nam-Bo.” Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 240–41, states that the Central Office of South Vietnam was authorized by the Lao Dong at its Third Party Congress in September 1960 and reactivated in 1961. Pike, *Viet Cong*, 137, is dubious as to whether the Central Office of South Vietnam was anything other than the merged command structure of the People’s Revolutionary Party and the National Liberation Front, but that the People’s Army of Vietnam units in the South had their own direct chain of command to Hanoi. George Carver, “The Faceless Viet Cong,” *Foreign Affairs* 44 (April 1966): 351, states that Central Office of South Vietnam was a term still in circulation but that captured Viet Cong simply referred to it as the People’s Revolutionary Party’s Central Committee which also contained the headquarters of the National Liberation Front. Carver and Pike agree that the Central Office of South Vietnam was a mobile, sometimes peripatetic body which was prudently located on the Tay Ninh Province–Cambodia border.

## Current Affairs Committee

Within the Central Office of South Vietnam headquarters structure was the Current Affairs Committee. Theoretically, the Current Affairs Committee was the highest operational echelon of the People's Revolutionary Party. It was at the Central Office of South Vietnam that the Party Congress, made up of high regional and provincial officials, was convened. Its most important function was to elect from among its own members a Central Executive Committee of 30 to 40 members. The Central Executive Committee appointed from its members the Current Affairs Committee and Current Affairs Committee functional units, that is, the Secretary Section (or Communications Section) and the Security Section. The Current Affairs Committee thus became the action agency of the Central Office of South Vietnam and the party, conducting the day-to-day business of the Central Executive Committee. After coordination with the Military Affairs Committee, it was the Current Affairs Committee that issued the various Central Office of South Vietnam directives which were sent down through the People's Revolutionary Party hierarchy.<sup>59</sup>

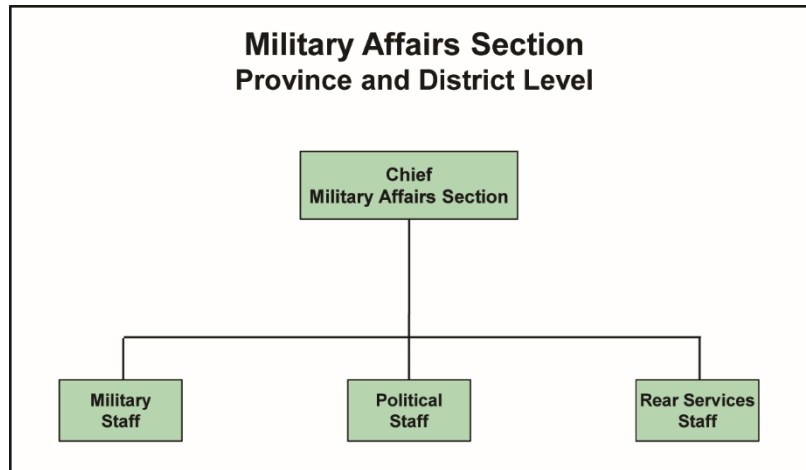
Since the Current Affairs Committee met continuously, it often was referred to as the Permanent or Standing section. The activities of the Current Affairs Committee ensured control and direction. When the situation warranted, the Current Affairs Committee also met jointly with the Military Affairs Committee to review past activities and to plan future operations.<sup>60</sup>

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59. Hanoi's Central Office For South Vietnam (COSVN), In this work it stated: "It is the Current Affairs Committee of COSVN which meets continuously and in addition includes the most powerful COSVN members which is the highest Communist authority in South Vietnam." See also Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 241; and Albert E. Palmerlee, "The Central Office of South Viet-Nam," US Mission in Vietnam: Viet-Nam Documents and Research Notes, Document No. 40 – Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Fred Walker Collection, Box 03, Folder 17, Item Number: 20580317001 August 1968. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2058/20580317001.pdf>.

60. Conley, "The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure in South Vietnam," Vol. I, 29–37.

Table 8. Military Affairs Section: Province and District Level.



Source: *The Viet Cong Infrastructure* (Saigon: United States Mission in Vietnam, June 1970), 21

The Secretary Section was the administrative element of the Current Affairs Committee and was headed by a party secretary and two deputy secretaries. The party secretary was the most important member because he decided what matters the Current Affairs Committee would consider.<sup>61</sup>

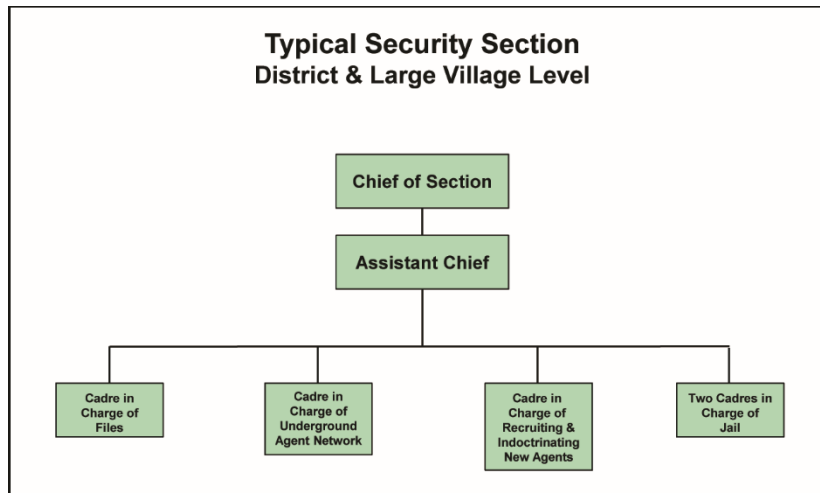
The Security Section was responsible for the investigation of party members accused of deviating from party ideology or instructions. Although this section would normally handle only cases involving high-level party officials, its members could investigate any party member. It also had independent communication links with the Ministry of Public Security in Hanoi, which provided most Security Section personnel.<sup>62</sup>

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61. Conley, "The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure in South Vietnam," Vol. I, 29–37.

62. Conley, "The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure in South Vietnam," Vol. I, 52.

Table 9. Typical Security Section: District and Large Village Level.



Source: *The Viet Cong Infrastructure* (Saigon: United States Mission in Vietnam, June 1970), 24

### Extensions (Organizational)

At the next level below were five strengthened interprovincial zones and a special Saigon-Gia Dinh organization. Beneath the regional committees were provincial and district party committees, which supervised the activities of village and hamlet-level members. The basic party unit was the party cell.<sup>63</sup>

A most important operational headquarters was that of the Provincial Committee, a key center for the coordination and control not only of the party but also of the activities of the extra-party infrastructure such as the National Liberation Front, its fronts, associations, and the armed units.<sup>64</sup>

The number and nature of the functional agencies of the Provincial Committees varied with requirements, situation, and geography. The Party emphasized limiting the number of agencies to those essential to operations. In general, these included six vital functions:

- Communications;

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63. Conley, "The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure in South Vietnam," Vol. I, 29–37.

64. Conley, "The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure in South Vietnam," Vol. I, 29.

- Propaganda and party training;
- Mass organizing work among the civil population and psychological operations against the enemy;
- Economy, production, and supply;
- Military affairs;
- Security.<sup>65</sup>

At the district, city, and village levels, the number of committees and their subordinate basic units varied according to conditions. Flexibility was more the order of the day than at the provincial level.<sup>66</sup>

In conclusion, the Central Office of South Vietnam was established in order to provide Hanoi with the essential coordination and control, including military control, relative to the overall insurgency in the south. The Central Office of South Vietnam itself was a southern command structure dominated by People's Revolutionary Party Lao Dong members. It meshed the policies, strategies, and activities of the insurgency at the top command level. Below that level, it utilized the People's Revolutionary Party structure to carry its instructions to its various organizations.<sup>67</sup>

### **The Provisional Revolutionary Government**

The achievement of Hanoi's international goals required at least partial diplomatic recognition that a southern provisional government did, in fact, exist. Foreign recognition of a provisional government other than that of Saigon had certain obvious advantages.

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65. Conley, "The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure in South Vietnam," Vol. I, 29.

66. Conley, "The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure in South Vietnam," Vol. I, 29.

67. "Strive to Establish a Revolutionary Government at All Levels to Keep Pace with the Development of the Situation," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 13—The Early History of Vietnam, Box 08, Folder 15, Item Number: 2310815007, 1969. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/231/2310815007.pdf>. See also Conley, *The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure*, Vol. I, 29.

To establish such a government, a formal civil administration had to be created not only at the national but at the provincial, district, and village levels. Such a civil administration had to have a flexible organizational form with the objective or goal of expanding de facto insurgent control. The intermediate step was the creation of the People's Liberation Committees, sometimes referred to as the People's Revolutionary Councils.<sup>68</sup>

A March 1968 Central Office of South Vietnam directive set out the size and ideal format for the People's Liberation Committees. For example, at the provincial and district levels, People's Liberation Committees were elected, but if elections were not possible, appointments were made and announced by the local National Liberation Front associations. In villages with a population of 3,000 or less, fifteen members were selected; villages of between 3,000 and 5,000 persons selected twenty to twenty-five members; and so forth. Committee members, who were also People's Revolutionary Party members, were appointed to posts of information and culture, security, education, public and social welfare. The hamlet followed the village format. The authority vested in the People's Liberation Committees was that of governmental jurisdiction.<sup>69</sup>

The National Liberation Front mass associations were often absorbed by the newly formed People's Liberation Committees, but the Central Committee of the National Liberation Front remained the spokesman for the entire Viet Cong organization.<sup>70</sup>

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68. "Strive to Establish a Revolutionary Government at All Levels to Keep Pace with the Development of the Situation." See also Conley, *The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure*, 29; MACV/MACCORDS, "North Vietnamese Presence in the Viet Cong Infrastructure," 16 September 1969, Accession No. 72 A-835, Annex A-F.

69. Conley, *The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure*, Vol.1, 99.

70. CIA, "Communist Liberation Committees in South Vietnam," 7-11. See also "Enemy Organization for the Conduct of the War in South Vietnam," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 08, Folder 12, Item Number: 2310812002, 1968. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/231/2310812002.pdf>.

In late 1963, the Central Office of South Vietnam issued Directive 27, which called for the establishment of a “revolutionary government” in order to “keep pace with the development of the situation.” The directive continued:

At present, we do not establish the People’s Liberation Committees for the Sub-Regions and Regions (Zones and Inter-zones), but all Regions and Sub-Regions must organize sections for directing governmental affairs. The section chief will be the deputy secretary of the Party Committee. The section also has a deputy section chief (who was a Party Committee member), and a number of section members. The section will assume the responsibility of the People’s Liberation Committees in the Region and Sub-Region. The Region and Sub-Region government sections will help the Party Committees provide leadership for and supervise the activities of People’s Liberation Committees at various levels in the implementation of Party policies and lines concerning governmental matters in the Regions and Sub-Regions.<sup>71</sup>

The directive also called for the establishment of a governmental leadership section for South Vietnam.<sup>72</sup>

By October 15, 1968, twenty-two Provincial Liberation Committees and thirty-five Viet Cong district committees were formed, mostly in Government of Vietnam Corps I and IV. At the

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71. “The Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Viet-nam,” Part A, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 09, Folder 13, Item Number: 2310913002 January 1972. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/231/2310913002a.pdf>. See also “The Viet Cong Infrastructure: A Background Paper” (Saigon: US Embassy, June 1970), 37.

72. “The Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Viet-nam,” Part I. See also “The Viet Cong Infrastructure: A Background Paper,” 37; and Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 256–57.



village level, over nine hundred committees were functioning.<sup>73</sup> During the first part of 1969, the National Liberation Front and the “Alliance of Democratic Peace Forces,” along with the People’s Revolutionary Party and the Liberation Peasants’ Association, reportedly held a joint conference to establish a People’s Revolutionary Government, and June 6–8, 1969, a “South Vietnam People’s Delegate Congress” was reportedly held to select government membership.<sup>74</sup>

### **International Role**

The formation of the People’s Revolutionary Government, which was recognized by the bloc countries—India, Burma, and Indonesia—was the key to Viet Cong infrastructure efforts to gain international recognition and support for its forthcoming role in international negotiations on Vietnam. In particular, the People’s Revolutionary Government focused on the forthcoming Paris Conference on Vietnam, while also providing a vehicle for the eventual reunification of North and South Vietnam which would have some semblance of legality. This argument is substantiated by the Peace Proposal of the People’s Revolutionary Government of the Republic of South Vietnam, July 1, 1971, which stated its negotiating positions for the Paris Conference.<sup>75</sup>

The strategy was successful. In the Paris Agreement on Vietnam, January 27, 1973, the People’s Revolutionary Government participated as an equal power with the United States, the

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73. Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 256–57. See also Evan J. Parker, Jr., “PHOENIX Year End Report,” Memorandum to Assistant Chief of Staff, CORDS, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Dale W. Andrade Collection, Box 29, Folder 04, Item Number: 24992904009, 21 March 1969. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2499/24992904009.pdf>. “The latest data available (15 January 1969) shows that the Liberation Committees have been identified in 37 of the 44 provinces and in 75 of 244 districts in RVN. The total number of identifiable hamlets considered to be under Liberation Committee influence is 3,367.”

74. “The Consultative Conference Decision to Convene a Congress of National Delegates,” Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 03, Folder 08, Item Number: 2310308007 10 June 1969. See also CIA, “Communist Liberation Committees in South Vietnam,” 12.

75. “Internal PRG Documents Of Political Settlement,” Liberation Radio Broadcast, 10 June 1969, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 04—Political Settlement, Box 01, Folder 09, Item Number: 2300109012, 25 January 1969. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/230/2300109012a.pdf>. See also Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 258; and for a listing of the members of the People’s Revolutionary Government, see Turner, *Vietnamese Communism*, 259.

Democratic Republic of Vietnam, and the Government of Vietnam. The result was the cease-fire.<sup>76</sup>

### **Communist Intelligence and Security Systems**

There were two clandestine functions vital to the Communist effort in South Vietnam. One was to obtain intelligence on the opposition and its allies. The other was to maintain internal security and perform disciplinary and terrorist functions within the Communist organizations and the areas they controlled or influenced. In this latter sense, there was a similarity to the repressive functions of the Soviet KGB. Terrorism received considerable attention in the Western press, but security and disciplinary activities were not given equal coverage.

There is some question as to whether both functions came under one office situated both in Hanoi and Central Office of South Vietnam, or were separate but coordinated organizations. The preponderance of evidence suggests that two separate organizations existed, each with its own specific mission. They were the Central Research Agency and the Security Service. At the local level in the south, however, the missions of these two organizations at times overlapped, with individual agents performing dual functions.<sup>77</sup>

### **The Central Research Agency**

The Central Research Agency was essential to Hanoi's command and control of the southern insurgency. A complex, sophisticated, and excellent professional intelligence system, it had its beginnings as far back as the war with the French. Agents were in place in 1954 and reported directly to Hanoi by means of a superb electronic communications system.<sup>78</sup> After collection, intelligence data was analyzed and collated with additional information from other

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76. Gareth Porter, *Vietnam*, 556–58.

77. Porter, "Vietnam," 456–87.

78. Zasloff, *The Role of North Vietnam in the Southern Insurgency*, 22. Steven T. Hosmer, *Viet Cong Repression and Its Implications for the Future* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company, 1970), 6–8.

parts in the south, as well as from abroad. Hanoi was able to provide accurate and timely information to its southern units, as well as to impose additional requirements where needed. Thus, southern sector commanders could be kept informed not only about their own area but also about the overall picture of insurgency in the south. Campaign plans could be drawn up and targets selected with the knowledge of all strategic implications.

Communist intelligence operations were extensive and well planned from the very beginning. The Central Research Agency, which operated directly under the National Defense Committee of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, was coordinated with the Lao Dong Party. As evidence of the importance to Central Research Agency operations, Central Research Agency membership included—at least until the early 1960s—President Ho Chi Minh, Prime Minister Pham Van Dong, and Defense Minister General Vo Nguyen Giap.<sup>79</sup>

The Central Research Agency had six main sections: cadres or agents, communications, espionage, research, training, and a special code unit. Each section had its subunits. For example, the Research Section included political, economic, and military affairs units.<sup>80</sup> The Central Research Agency also supervised and directed centers for overseas operations. Special units were located in Hai Phong and Hongay, which ran operations from Hong Kong, Paris, and other overseas points. A special unit at Vinh was responsible for operations into Laos and Cambodia. And finally, a unit based at Vinh Linh handled operations along the Demilitarized Zone and was responsible for infiltrating highly trained intelligence agents and supplies across the Demilitarized Zone by sea and through Laos and Cambodia to wherever intelligence bases were

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79. Zasloff, *The Role of North Vietnam in the Southern Insurgency*, 22–24.

80. D. M. Condit, et al., *Challenge and Response in Internal Conflict*, Vol. 1 (Washington, DC: The American University, Center for Research in Social Systems, 1968), 347.

located.<sup>81</sup> Within South Vietnam, a network of bases was maintained to provide reception facilities for agents from the north, and to relay equipment to Viet Cong units in the south. For its communication needs, the Central Research Agency maintained its own radio network plus an extensive system of couriers.<sup>82</sup>

Under Hanoi's direction, the regional committees were responsible for their areas but as a rule, did not establish permanent bases. The exception arose with the development of the Central Office of South Vietnam, which provided a more or less stable location in Cambodia. Intelligence officers often remained apart from military units, which they might use as decoys if Government of Vietnam troops approached.<sup>83</sup>

According to intelligence reports, through 1962 most operations in South Vietnam, except for high-level operations controlled directly from Hanoi, were run by the regional or interzone committees. Later they came under the Central Office of South Vietnam. These included a wide variety of activities such as penetration of Government of Vietnam offices to determine plans and capabilities, recruiting Government of Vietnam military members, and providing intelligence for paramilitary activities, espionage, subversion, and other political operations.<sup>84</sup>

This system was excellent and provided timely and accurate information, enabling the Communists to avoid Government of Vietnam military operations, or conversely, to identify situations where effective raids might be undertaken. The information was often so detailed as to

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81. Zasloff, *The Role of North Vietnam in the Southern Insurgency*, 24.

82. Zasloff, *The Role of North Vietnam in the Southern Insurgency*, 24.

83. Zasloff, *The Role of North Vietnam in the Southern Insurgency*, 24.

84. Zasloff, *The Role of North Vietnam in the Southern Insurgency*, 24.

identify not only the Government of Vietnam units and their strength, but also lists of their members and positions.<sup>85</sup>

In summary, the Central Research Agency directed three kinds of operations:

- Those it conducted itself in the south with agents trained in the north;
- Those carried out by its Foreign Intelligence Service, including the massing of political and strategic information;
- The activities of the Military Intelligence Service, that part of the People's Army of Vietnam general staff which was primarily responsible for espionage in South Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia, and which included strategic and tactical intelligence.<sup>86</sup>

The Central Research Agency organization, professionalism, and effectiveness were of the highest caliber. This enabled Hanoi and Central Office of South Vietnam to determine policy, strategy, and tactics of the highest order. The Central Research Agency possessed the decisive advantage of lengthy experience and continuity of activity in its area of responsibility. Without such an organization, it is doubtful that Hanoi's efforts to liberate the south would have been effective.

### **The People's Security Service**

Under such adverse conditions of warfare, particularly after US intervention, how was the Viet Cong infrastructure able to maintain its cohesiveness, its hierarchical control, and discipline? How was it able to avoid, if not mass defections to the Government of Vietnam, at least significant numbers of dissatisfied and disillusioned Communist agents either simply quitting or defecting to the Government of Vietnam? Certainly, the dedication of the People's

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85. Zasloff, *The Role of North Vietnam in the Southern Insurgency*, 29.

86. Zasloff, *The Role of North Vietnam in the Southern Insurgency*, 29–30.

Revolutionary Party and the many organizations of the National Liberation Front and the idealism of their programs provides a partial answer to these questions. Another part of the answer lies in the People's Security Service, which the Viet Cong called An Ninh.<sup>87</sup>

This pervasive organization reached down to the village and hamlet level and was the primary instrument of control in the south.<sup>88</sup> The Viet Cong Security Service was an organic part of the Ministry of Public Security in Hanoi. It reported directly and regularly to that ministry, and each of its echelons above district level was at times subject to direct orders from the Ministry of Public Security. Hanoi's control was further ensured by the fact that many key posts in the Security Service, from Central Office of South Vietnam down to the village level, were held by Ministry of Public Security officials from the north. These officials, whose training was extensive and whose loyalty absolute, operated in all areas of the south.<sup>89</sup>

Infiltration of Ministry of Public Security officials began as early as 1960 and by 1967 was estimated to have reached a rate of 500 or more agents per year. In 1966, the total number of northerners working in the security service in the south was estimated at between 15,000 and 20,000, and by 1968, the number was put at over 25,000.<sup>90</sup>

The People's Security Service was organized along hierarchical lines. In 1968, it consisted of a 500-man headquarters operating out of the Central Office of South Vietnam, plus subordinate levels in the regions, provinces, districts, and villages. A typical provincial security section might be staffed by over 100 agents and be divided into four subsections:

- An administrative subsection which handled routine communications.

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87. "The Viet Cong Security Service: A Professional Apparatus," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Glen Helm Collection, Box 13, Folder 06, Item Number: 1071306005, 28 November 1967. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/107/1071306005.pdf>. See also Zasloff, *The Role of North Vietnam in the Southern Insurgency*, 28.

88. "The Viet Cong Security Service," 20. See also Hosmer, *Viet Cong Repression*, 6.

89. "The Viet Cong Security Service," 19–20. See also Hosmer, *Viet Cong Repression* 5–7.

90. "The Viet Cong Security Service," 14. See also Hosmer, *Viet Cong Repression*, 6.

- A political protection subsection which ran internal security, party security, and counterintelligence operations.
- An espionage subsection which operated in Government of Vietnam-controlled areas.
- A legal affairs subsection which was responsible for all interrogation facilities and prisons.

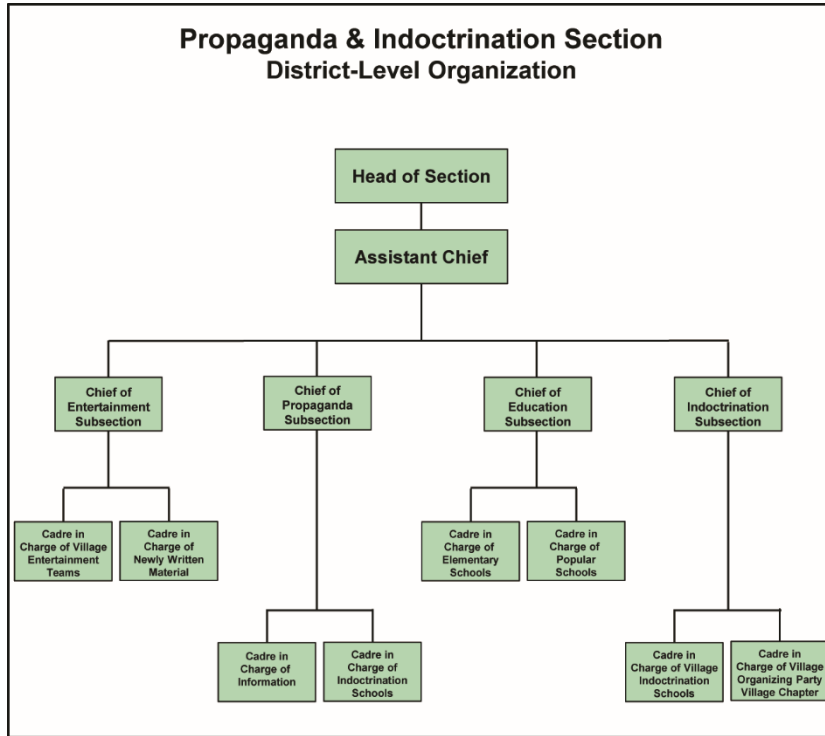
This formal organization was, in turn, supported by a recruited network of thousands of secret agents and informants in both urban and rural areas.<sup>91</sup> As a result, the People's Security Service exercised pervasive control over the Viet Cong infrastructure and the population in Viet Cong areas.

The People's Security Service performed a number of critical missions in the south. It collected information on various Government of Vietnam security and intelligence agencies, thus duplicating a Central Research Agency function. This duplication also provided confirmation as to the exactness of Central Research Agency information. Yet another major responsibility was the protection of liberated and Communist base areas against allied agents. In this function, People's Security Service agents tracked down and investigated any suspected Government of Vietnam agents and exercised surveillance over those who might be sympathetic to the Government of Vietnam. Intensive and frequent indoctrination programs for both Viet Cong infrastructure and the general population were conducted.

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91. CIA, "Popular Attitudes and Internal Security in North Vietnam," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Vietnam Archive Collection, Box 0001, Folder 0812, Item Number: F029200010815, 04 December 1964, 3. [https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/F0292 /F029200010815.pdf](https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/F0292/F029200010815.pdf). See also Conley, *The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure*, Vol. I, 52–53.

Table 10. Propaganda and Indoctrination Section:  
Typical District-Level Organization.



Source: *The Viet Cong Infrastructure* (Saigon: United States Mission in Vietnam, June 1970), 28

A third major function of the security apparatus was to maintain constant surveillance over all agents and personnel serving in the Viet Cong infrastructure, in order to ensure their political reliability. Files were kept on all agents in local Viet Cong organizations who were thought potentially unreliable. All echelons of the Viet Cong bureaucracy, even senior officials, were subject to such surveillance. A chief of a provincial security section could bypass the provincial bureaucracy, including the Current Affairs Committee, and report directly to the regional security section.<sup>92</sup>

At the district level, the security section's functions were primarily those of supervision over the village sections, although the People's Security Service could conduct investigations

92. Conley, *The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure*, 6–7.



found unfeasible by the village security agents. Additionally, the district security section could carry out interrogations, prepare dossiers on suspects, pronounce judgments, transfer prisoners to higher echelons, maintain files on district residents working for the Government of Vietnam in other areas, and run prisons.<sup>93</sup>

It was at the village level that population control by the Security Service was pervasive. The Security Chief generally had an assistant and various agents in charge of different functions. The chief of the Village Security Section had direct access to a higher authority. Full control by the Village Party Secretary would have negated the value of the security branch as an independent observer and a counterbalance to the Village Party Secretary.<sup>94</sup>

Members of the Village Security Section were required to maintain files on village personnel, including Party chapter members. The secret agents of the Security Section normally kept 15 to 20 families under surveillance, and these were categorized according to their degree of allegiance.<sup>95</sup> The objective of the Security Section was to make each peasant responsible for the actions of his neighbors and their families.

Subsidiary functions included control of peasant travel by use of a permit system, upon return to his village, if a peasant was suspected of a security violation, his family was held in custody until he was either cleared or punished.<sup>96</sup>

The Village Security Section also exercised control over mail and radio broadcasts and conducted intensive proselytizing with the objective of isolating villages from outside events and from other villages.<sup>97</sup> While population and Viet Cong infrastructure control were the primary

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93. Conley, *The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure*, Vol. I, 7.

94. "The Viet Cong Infrastructure: A Background Paper," 22–23.

95. David W. P. Elliot, and W. A. Stewart, *Pacification and the Viet Cong System in Dinh Tuong: 1966-1967* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, January 1969), 26.

96. David W. P. Elliot, and W. A. Stewart, *Pacification and the Viet Cong System in Dinh Tuong*, 24.

97. R. Michael Pearce, *The Insurgent Environment*, 88–91.

functions of the Security Section, the direction and conduct of repression had still another facet to its operations. It was the Security Service which drew up the “notorious blacklists” of persons to be killed or imprisoned.<sup>98</sup> The Security Service manned the Armed Reconnaissance Teams which abducted and assassinated victims in Government of Vietnam-controlled areas. The Security Service interrogated and recommended punishment of prisoners and finally carried out death sentences.<sup>99</sup>

In addition to controlling and disciplining the population and the Viet Cong infrastructure, the purpose of Security Section Armed Reconnaissance Teams was to achieve the disintegration of the Government of Vietnam. Through assassination, demoralization, and subversion of personnel at all levels of the Government of Vietnam structure, the Viet Cong sought to erode and eventually paralyze the Government of Vietnam’s ability to govern.<sup>100</sup> The target list embraced the leadership of the Government of Vietnam’s administrative apparatus, both civil and military, from Saigon down to the village or hamlet level. Of particular importance were the Government of Vietnam’s civil and military intelligence organizations and agents: rural development agents, Chiu Hoi (returnees), officials and Viet Cong defectors, police, and especially Phung Hoang personnel.<sup>101</sup> From mid-1966 to the end of 1969, 44,000 were assassinated or abducted.<sup>102</sup>

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98. For an explanation on Communists use of assassinations and kidnappings to control the population, see “Exploitation of Communist Atrocities,” Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03—Insurgency Warfare, Box 13, Folder 06, Item Number: 2171306008, 17 July 1965. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/217/2171306008.pdf>. See also *The Human Cost of Communism in Vietnam: A Compendium Prepared for the Subcommittee to Investigate the Administration of the Internal Security Act and Other Internal Security Laws of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972). [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/96979](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/96979).

99. “The Viet Cong Security Service: A Professional Apparatus,” 15.

100. Conley, *The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure*, 8.

101. Conley, *The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure*, Vol. I, 8–14, 21.

102. Conley, *The Communist Insurgent Infrastructure*, Vol. I, 8–14, 21.

Thus, the Security Service was the glue that held the Viet Cong infrastructure together. It exercised control and maintained discipline. Additionally, the Security Service carried out destabilizing operations in the form of terrorist and paramilitary operations against the Government of Vietnam. It was pervasive in Communist-controlled regions and it possessed both organization and the power of life and death over the Viet Cong infrastructure, as well as over the general population. The Security Service fulfilled all the requirements of a model police state.

The two Communist organizations—the intelligence organization controlled by the Central Research Agency and the Security Service controlled by the Ministry of Public Security in Hanoi—were absolutely essential to the conduct of insurgency in the South. Without these two organizations, the insurgency would have failed.

### **Summary**

To summarize, the North Vietnamese regime used as its initial core South Vietnamese Lao Dong Party members, most of who had been in place during and since the end of the anti-French war in 1954. These forces were supplemented by infiltrators from the North. Then, in 1960, the National Liberation Front was established with the purpose of overthrowing the Government of Vietnam.

The National Liberation Front and its various subordinate fronts were designed to attract, organize, and control anti-Government of Vietnam dissidents, sympathizers, and uncommitted peasants. It had, as well, the objective of attracting international attention, recognition, and support, and it was successful in this. Further, the National Liberation Front provided an umbrella for the emergence of a southern Communist Party, and the facade of a South Vietnamese revolutionary government. Again, the National Liberation Front was successful.

Control of the fronts, the People's Revolutionary Party, and the Provisional Revolutionary Government was exerted from Hanoi by means of the Provisional Revolutionary Government and the People's Security Service. The People's Revolutionary Party to some extent, and the Security Service in an absolute sense, maintained a pervasive discipline and control over party membership and sympathizers, the Provisional Revolutionary Government, and the fronts. Controlled and primarily staffed by Hanoi, the Secret Service employed measures of repression similar to those of the Russian KGB. These elements together constituted the Viet Cong infrastructure.

With the creation and functioning of the Viet Cong infrastructure with all its varying and parallel organizations disciplined and guided by means of an interlocking structural design, a formidable force for insurgency was forged. It was an accomplishment of such skill, precision, and refinement that one must give a large measure of credit to its guiding genius, Ho Chi Minh, and to the Communist Politburo in Hanoi. They created a force which had to be neutralized if the war was to be won by the Government of Vietnam, and this task became a primary motivation for the South Vietnamese and their American advisors.

## The Failure of South Vietnamese Pacification Programs, 1954–60

### Ngo Dinh Diem's Presidency

Upon Ngo Dinh Diem's assumption of office in 1954, few, if any French, American or Vietnamese observers were willing to predict that he or his regime would last. With the departure of the French, Diem soon found that the upper echelons of the emerging army were controlled by his principal rival, General Nguyen Van Hinh, a once and future Vietnamese officer of the French Army who had long been a protégé of Emperor Bao Dai.<sup>1</sup> The Saigon police were under the control of the Binh Xuyen, a powerful organized crime syndicate that controlled prostitution in Saigon as well as the narcotics trade. The Binh Xuyen gained control of the police by bribing Emperor Bao Dai during the last stages of the French-Indochina War.<sup>2</sup> Economically, the country showed the scars of eight years of war:

Farmland was abandoned and overgrown with weeds; irrigation and drainage facilities had fallen into disrepair; canals, the indispensable waterways of the South, needed dredging; the greater part of the work animals had been killed off; and all of this was reflected in a sharp decline in production and the disappearance of the all-important surplus of rice for export.<sup>3</sup>

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1. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 242–69.

2. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 283–314. See also Edward G. Lansdale, *In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) 252–54, recounted in Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 245.

3. Wolf Ladejinsky, "Agrarian Reform in Vietnam," in Wesley R. Fishel, ed. *Problems of Freedom: South Vietnam Since Independence* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press of Glencoe, Inc. 1961), 159. See also "Memorandum From the Land Reform Adviser in the United States Operations Mission in Vietnam (Ladejinsky) to the Ambassador in Vietnam (Reinhardt)," Saigon, June 7, 1955 in "210. Dispatch from the Ambassador in Vietnam (Reinhardt) to the Department of State," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Vietnam*, Vol. I, No. 453, Saigon, June 15, 1955. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v01/d210>.

Most importantly, with the removal of long-serving French bureaucrats, there were precious few native-born Vietnamese capable of making the important decisions necessary to cope with the serious problems facing the country. It was not an exaggeration to say that the reach of Diem's government virtually stopped at the boundaries of Saigon. Much of what was formerly Cochinchina was ruled by the dissident, quasi-religious Hoa Hao and Cao Dai sects, "which were not only separatist but virtually enclave governments defended by their own private armies and maintaining only the loosest federated relations with Saigon."<sup>4</sup> The rest of the countryside was nominally under the control of whatever remnants of local village government existed. There was little if any assistance from the national government in Saigon.

To complicate Diem's problems further, the US Navy and other Allied nations brought between 750,000 and 900,000 refugees from Haiphong and other North Vietnam ports to Saigon during Operation Passage to Freedom in compliance with the terms of the 1954 Geneva Accords.<sup>5</sup> In the aftermath of the war, cities in the new South Vietnam were teeming with



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Figure 13. Vietnamese woman and her children.

Vietnamese peasants who had fled the war seeking security in urban areas, confronting Diem

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4. Pike, *Viet Cong*, 58. For the American Ambassador's assessment of the standoff between General Hinh and Prime Minister Diem, see "Ambassador Heath to Department of State," 27 August 1954, 751G.00/8-2954, records of Department of State. "By late August General Hinh was freely admitting to members of the Military Assistance Advisory Group that he had been consulting with leaders of the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects on forming a government to succeed Diem," recounted in Spector, *Advice and Support*, 233.

5. Fred Ray Blakemore, "Vietnam: The Untold Miracle at CAP Echo 4," February 8, 1968, Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Ronald B. Frankum, Jr. Collection, Passage to Freedom Interviews. 1039AU2483 Item Number: 1039AU2483, 16 February 2002. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/453163](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/453163) and <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/audio/1039/1039AU2483.mp3>. See also *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 283-314.

with one crisis after another. Hovering in the background was a persistent, low-level insurgency in South Vietnam from 1954–60. Believing that he knew best, Diem alienated many political and social elements in South Vietnam which might have offered him political support. As time progressed, Diem's government and his party became strikingly out of touch with the people. As dissatisfaction with the new government in Saigon grew, resistance to Diem intensified, providing fertile ground for those willing to listen to Hanoi's message.<sup>6</sup> The Viet Cong seized the opportunity to expand, thus filling the gap between the government and the populace.

Fighting for his political (and personal) survival, Diem had neither the time nor the inclination to address the question of growing resistance to his authoritarian rule nor to deal with the initial stages of an insurgency. Lacking a broad political base of support, Diem realized that to survive he would need to include refugees arriving from the north, among them were many Catholics. The mass movement out of North Vietnam provided three key benefits to Diem: (1) In 1955 and 1956, the refugees were the most convincing support for Diem's argument that free elections were impossible in the DRV; (2) The refugees engaged the sympathies of the American people as few developments in Vietnam have before or since, and solidly underwrote the US decision for unstinting support of Diem; and (3) The predominantly Catholic Tonkinese refugees provided Diem with a clique: a politically malleable, culturally distinct group, wholly distrustful of Ho Chi Minh and the DRV, dependent for subsistence on Diem's government, and attracted to Diem as a co-religionist.<sup>7</sup>

Having now established a more substantial base of political support, Diem was then able to turn his attention to other problems facing the nation, especially those in the rural areas. High

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6. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol.1, 283–314. See also Department of State, *American Foreign Policy, 1950-1955: Basic Documents*, 1:755, recounted in Spector, *Advice and Support*, 225–26.

7. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 283–314.

priority had to be given to improving the condition of the northern refugees who came south during the ten months following the Geneva settlement. A majority of the refugees simply squatted in Saigon, causing near anarchy due to the increased pressures on social services.

Although the subsequent resettlement of the refugees and their integration into the life of the country are not matters of specific concern to this study, these efforts are important because some of the techniques employed by Diem and his government were later used in other Vietnamese pacification programs. This was especially true in the case of the Land Development Centers, which, to a certain extent, were a logical extension of the refugee resettlement program.<sup>8</sup> Finally, although the overwhelming majority of the refugees were peasant farmers, those who were better educated or politically important quickly found their way into the South Vietnamese civil service, often in high positions.<sup>9</sup>

In what was to become a much-repeated imitation of the Communists' methods of population control, the South Vietnamese government began organizing the population into Mutual Aid Family Groups (Lien Gia Tuong Tro), whose primary purpose was to function as security cells. Each five-family group was supposed "to control the behavior of its members and

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8. "Activities Performed by the Commissariat General for Land Development," Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Center and Archive, John Donnell Collection, Box 06, Folder 08, Item Number: 0720608001, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/072/0720608001.pdf>. See also "Briefing on Land Development," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, John Donnell Collection, Box 06, Folder 08, Item Number: 0720608003, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/072/0720608003.pdf>.

9. For a review of an extensive training program that the US government undertook to train the South Vietnamese civil service in administrative roles, see "Training the Supervisors," Government: Administrators' Training (September 1969), *Viet-Nam Bulletin* (Washington, DC, September 1969), Viet-Nam Info Series No. 7, <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/1653/16530101003.pdf>. For those wishing to better understand American efforts to train the South Vietnamese in civil administration through the efforts of the Michigan State University Advisory Group, report see Ralph H. Smuckler, "Report on the MSU-Vietnam Project," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Michigan State University Archives & Historical Collections, John A. Hannah Papers, Box 55, Folder 48, Item Number: 6-20-195D-116-UA2-1-12\_000200, April, 1966. [https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/msu/6-20-195D-116-UA2-1-12\\_000200.pdf](https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/msu/6-20-195D-116-UA2-1-12_000200.pdf).



to report any irregularities to village or city security officers”—in effect, to spy on each other.<sup>10</sup> Although this act merely formalized and legalized the existence of political reeducation centers, it also had the effect of advertising the growing trend toward political repression existing in South Vietnam. In January 1956, President Diem escalated his anti-Communist program by signing a decree formally providing for the arrest and imprisonment of “any person considered to be a danger to the defense of the state.”<sup>11</sup> Thousands of innocent people were jailed under this law—the majority of whom were neither Communists nor pro-Communists. In April 1959, Diem would carry this law one step further. Special military tribunals were created and specifically empowered to sentence to death anyone committing crimes “with the aim of sabotage or infringing upon the security of the State or injuring the lives or property of the people” (Law 10 of 1959).<sup>12</sup>

In 1956, partially for reasons of security but also to establish centralized government and political control over rural Vietnam, Diem increased the number of provinces to 41 and personally appointed the province chiefs. His criterion, of course, was loyalty rather than ability. On paper, the province chiefs were responsible for the district chiefs and village officials; however, in practice, the heavy hand of the Saigon was felt in all matters. Diem and his brother

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10. Robert Scigliano, *South Vietnam: Nation Under Stress* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1963), 170. For a background of what population control programs were developed in Communist China and exported later to Northern Vietnam to control the rural population, see Floyd L. Singer, “Pao China: Social Control in China and Vietnam,” Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 06—Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Box 25, Folder 04, Item Number: 2322504013, November 1965. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/232/2322504013.pdf>. For an explanation of what was attempted to counter Communist penetration in South Vietnam, see “Forms of Popular Organization in Rural Area,” Than-Van trans, Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Dale W. Andrade Collection, Box 02, Folder 28, Item Number: 24990228012, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2499/24990228012.pdf>.

11. “Ordinance No. 6 of the Republic of Vietnam on Security Measures Against Those Considered Dangerous to Public Security,” Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 30, Folder 010, Item Number: 23130010005, January 11, 1956. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/231/23130010005.pdf>. See also Ordinance No. 6 as quoted in Bernard B. Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams: A Political and Military Analysis*, 2nd rev. ed. (New York: A. Praeger, 1967), 272.

12. Ngo Dinh Diem, “Law No. 10/59 of May 6, 1959.”

Nhu frequently sent down personal orders on even the most trivial matters. Also, ostensibly on security grounds, President Diem committed a critical error in his relations with those in leadership positions throughout the provinces by decreeing that all previously elected village and municipal councils were abolished.<sup>13</sup> New officials were appointed by Diem's hand-picked province chiefs on the recommendation of the district chiefs, who also were appointed by Saigon. According to CIA officer Rufus Phillips, this was one of Diem's greatest blunders. A former press officer in Diem's government stated the ramification clearly when he remarked, "Even if the Viet Minh had won some elections, the danger of doing away with the traditional system of village elections was greater. This was something that was part of the Vietnamese way of life . . . it wouldn't have made much difference if the Viet Minh had elected some village chiefs—they soon established their own underground governments anyway. Diem's mistake was in paralyzing himself."<sup>14</sup>

Along with some of the anti-Communist measures outlined above, military and police campaigns were undertaken in rural areas during 1956–57 to seek out and eliminate the Viet Cong. Although there are conflicting accounts of exactly what took place "there can be no doubt, on the basis of reports of the few impartial observers . . . that innumerable crimes and absolutely senseless acts of suppression against both real and suspected Communists and sympathizing villagers were committed. Efficiency took the form of brutality and a total disregard for the difference between determined foes and potential friends."<sup>15</sup>

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13. Rufus C. Phillips, III Interview by Charles Stuart Kennedy, McLean, VA, July 19, August 15, 1995, Part I, 17, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Rufus Phillips Collection, Box 03, Folder 28, Item Number: 23970328001, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2397/23970328001.pdf>.

14. Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 134. See also *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 283–314.

15. Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, Vol. 2, 976. See also "Viet Nam and the Fight Against Communism," Paper for 2nd Conference of the Asian Peoples Anti-Communist League, Manila: March 9-12, 1956,

In a remarkable acknowledgment of the effectiveness of the Communist's apparatus to manipulate and control the peasantry, the South Vietnamese government mirrored many of the Communist's techniques.<sup>16</sup>

### **Early Pacification Efforts of the Regime**

While dealing with his political and security problems, President Diem simultaneously undertook a program to address conditions in the rural areas with an eye toward building rapport with and expanding support for his government. Initially emerging from a military effort to stimulate and assist local peasants in rebuilding war-damaged public facilities, the Civic Action Program quickly developed into a program of community development. According to one source, Colonel Edward Lansdale, a detached American military officer attached to the CIA, created much of the program.<sup>17</sup> Small teams of approximately ten Civic Action cadres visited rural areas, especially villages formerly controlled by the Viet Minh, and worked with the peasants on a variety of self-help projects, such as rebuilding roads, digging wells, and building schools and dispensaries. The cadres also distributed drugs and seeds, gave inoculations, and taught the peasants how to hold elections. Dressed in the traditional black pajamas, 150 teams of cadres lived and worked among the peasants. To be sure, they also engaged in propaganda efforts for the Government of Vietnam, explaining new programs such as land reform and

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(Saigon: People's Directive Committee, 1956), <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/239/2391013001A.pdf>.

16. Scigliano, *South Vietnam*, 91.

17. William A. Nighswonger, *Rural Pacification in Vietnam* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1966), 38. For an explanation of what defined Civil Action, see "The Civic Action Program," trans., Vietnam Government—The Civic Action Program, Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Rufus Phillips Collection, Box 01, Folder 22, Item Number: 23970122008, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2397/23970122008.pdf>. As an aside, in his Vietnam masterpiece, *A Bright Shining Lie: John Paul Vann and America in Vietnam*, former *New York Times* reporter Neil Sheehan called Lansdale a "legendary clandestine operative." (For years, Lansdale was also rumored to be the model for Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, though Greene denied it, having written the book before Lansdale arrived in Vietnam.)

discussing the peasants' needs.<sup>18</sup> Although the Civic Action Program apparently showed signs of success in its first full year of operation, it was curtailed at the end of 1956 because of interagency rivalries between the Civic Action Directorate and the Ministries of Health, Information, and Agriculture. The latter organizations apparently felt threatened by the intrusion of the Civic Action Program into areas traditionally under their jurisdiction. Despite objections from the American US Agency for International Development (USAID) mission, which modestly supported civic action, after 1956 the program "became more propagandistic and political, with less emphasis on economic and social services to the people."<sup>19</sup>

Learning important lessons from the recent experience of resettling thousands of refugees from the north, the South Vietnamese expanded its pacification effort with the launch of Land Development Centers (*dinh dien* or *centres d'implantation*) by President Diem in late 1956. Having successfully resettled thousands of northern refugees on abandoned tracts of fertile rice lands, located primarily in the Delta, Diem saw additional opportunities to apply some of these newly acquired skills in other rural areas and also to expand the political base of his regime. The primary motivation for this new program, however, was the need to improve internal security rather than economic considerations.<sup>20</sup> In spite of the Government of Vietnam's efforts since 1954 to suppress armed resistance, security was still a serious problem in several areas because the government simply did not have the manpower to adequately patrol the countryside. The western Central Highlands (Haut Plateau) provinces bordering on Laos and Cambodia were readily susceptible to Communist infiltration from the north. There were still vast unsettled areas in the Delta where armed bands of bandits were free to establish hidden base camps and gain

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18. "The Civic Action Program."

19. Nighswonger, *Rural Pacification in Vietnam*, 36. *Rural Pacification in Vietnam* is probably the most comprehensive analysis of the early pacification programs prior to American expansion of the war. For additional information on the "Civic Action Program," Volume II, Part Three.

20. "Activities Performed by the Commissariat General for Land Development."

access to important food supplies. Rejecting the advice of his advisors to concentrate on the Delta, Diem placed a higher priority on guarding the Central Highlands because he believed that that was the most likely route of attack from the north. It was in Pleiku, the former royal hunting retreat of past Vietnamese emperors, that Diem envisaged that the true danger lay.



Courtesy of Robin Kern

Figure 14. Vietnam Regions.

A secondary motivation for the Government of Vietnam's Land Development Program was the alleviation of the overcrowding and poverty along the central coast where four million people were living on only 264,500 hectares (about 654,000 acres) of arable land.<sup>21</sup> By settling some of these people on undeveloped land, it was further hoped that agricultural production would be increased. There were also political considerations behind the Land Development Program. The Central Highlands, Emperor Bao Dai's former hunting preserve, was inhabited by 500,000 Montagnard tribal people. Relations between the Montagnards and the Vietnamese had never been particularly friendly. Diem hoped to integrate the Montagnards into Vietnamese society by regrouping them into permanent villages and thus subjecting them to greater governmental and administrative control. It has also been suggested that Diem planned to resettle families in Viet Minh-dominated areas who were considered unreliable by the new government. Unfortunately, the Land Development Centers for these people were to be little more than armed detention camps.<sup>22</sup>

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21. "Activities Performed by the Commissariat General for Land Development."

22. Dennis J. Duncanson, *Government and Revolution in Vietnam*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 247. For a more concise explanation of the complex nature of contesting the VC within the villages and to provide context when describing a "secure" and "unsecured" village, see "Background for the Village Development Program Including Aspects of the Vietnamese Village Today," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Harry Wagner Collection, Box 01, Folder 18, Item Number: 25590118001, January 1968. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2559/25590118001.pdf>.



Courtesy of Army University Press

Figure 15. South Vietnam Ethnic Map.

When the Land Development Program first officially began on April 23, 1957, the United States agreed to commit an initial ten million dollars in economic aid to it. Although the United States Operations Mission (USOM) was active in the initial stages of the program in both planning and implementation, wide divergences of view began to develop as to the program's

scope, direction, and tempo. While the Government of Vietnam had declared agricultural development to be one of the program's long-term goals, USOM believed it should be given primary attention right away. As the Government of Vietnam placed more and more emphasis on the political and security objectives of the program, other incompatibilities soon came into focus. The USMO wanted to concentrate on the Delta; Diem concentrated on the Central Highlands. The USMO believed each family in the highlands would require three to five hectares of land to subsist; Diem doggedly persisted in claiming one hectare would suffice. Tensions also arose over the management and use of USOM-supplied agricultural equipment. As a result of all this, by late 1957 multiple agencies within the American advisory effort had withdrawn financial support for the program, with the exception of providing equipment, spare parts, and tools. From that point on, the Government of Vietnam had to pay the costs of the program on its own.<sup>23</sup>

As with other projects throughout his time in office, Diem favored the Land Development Centers as a pet project. As was his habit, he took a great deal of personal interest in its direction and implementation, frequently making all the decisions himself.

Although the program was initially under the direction of the Agriculture Development Directorate, in April 1957 Diem created a special agency, the Commissariat General for Land Development (CGLD), which reported directly to him. Since Diem was fully committed to the program and "determined to push forward with all possible speed . . . planning and preparations for the implementation of land development quickly gathered momentum. . . ." From the beginning, the commissariat undertook operations at an almost breathtaking pace, and quickly extended the scope of its activities far beyond the original plans and schedules.<sup>24</sup>

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23. John D. Montgomery, *The Politics of Foreign Aid* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1962), 72–83.

24. William Henderson, "Opening of New Lands and Villages: The Republic of Vietnam's Land Development Program," in Fishel, *Problems of Freedom*, 127.



As originally conceived, the Land Development Program was to be implemented step by step in accordance with an orderly and predetermined timetable. This schedule called for careful selection of sites suitable for resettlement . . . Such studies would make possible fairly accurate estimates of the amount of land available for cultivation . . . the number of people to be settled . . . the fertility of the soil, the supply of water. . . . Once it was decided to establish a center at a given place, the next step was to prepare for the actual reception of the new settlers. This involved . . . extensive land clearing operations and leveling of land surfaces to accommodate public and private buildings. Wells had to be drilled, roads cut, and, depending on the nature of the terrain, dams, dikes, canals, and bridges had to be constructed. Temporary reception shelters and a great many other structures for headquarters, storehouses, dispensaries, and so on had to be built. Meanwhile, the movement of Vietnam's modern pioneers to the new centers had to be coordinated with all of these preparatory activities. The settlers were to be collected at various points . . . their transportation arranged . . . and provisions made for their sustenance after arrival and for an indefinite period in the future. As quickly as possible they had to be put to work completing the centers for permanent habitation, and, even more important, getting on with the business of farming, which was to furnish their livelihood and eventually make them independent of government support. Families were given subsidies for food, house construction, various household goods, farm implements, seeds, and

fertilizers, and provided with cheap credit to facilitate the transition to independence.<sup>25</sup>

In practice, however, the Land Development Program did not proceed in quite such an orderly fashion. Although a few Land Development Centers had been established in the Delta in the initial stages of the program, by mid-1957 the Government of Vietnam had shifted the geographic focus of its effort to the Central Highlands, which subsequently became a preoccupation of President Diem, as already noted. Second, the Government of Vietnam was in a hurry to achieve results, and the quickened pace of program implementation left little time for orderly planning and preparations. Third, since the program was being actively pushed by Diem, government officials were almost always reluctant to criticize his decisions or point out shortcomings. For instance, Diem himself frequently selected the sites for the Land Development Centers solely on the basis of military maps or aerial photographs, ignoring the analyses prepared by the Vietnamese and American technicians in the field. Diem's insistence on speed led to the program's overextension and to charges by USOM officials that the project was uneconomic. New centers were begun while earlier ones were never completed. In addition:

many sites turned out to have been poorly chosen, and all too often the number of settlers sent to a given center was all out of proportion to its potentialities. Most sites had been insufficiently prepared, and equipment and stores were frequently in short supply. The pioneers in many cases arrived at their new homes at the height of the rainy season, when little or no construction work could be done, and

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25. Henderson, "Opening of New Lands and Villages," 129.

when conditions inevitably tried the patience of even the most optimistic. Morale sagged and often there was much confusion.<sup>26</sup>

In spite of such criticisms and shortcomings, by mid-1959 the Government of Vietnam had resettled over 125,000 people in approximately ninety Land Development Centers. According to available statistics, approximately 44,000 people were resettled in the Haut Plateau, 25,000 in central and southern forest areas, and 55,000 in the Delta. Approximately 22,000 houses were constructed; 48,000 hectares of land cleared; and 31,000 hectares planted, 23,000 of that in rice.<sup>27</sup> To many people, these were certainly impressive achievements. It is also noteworthy that there seems to have been only a minimum amount of coercion used in resettling the people, although it seems unlikely those considered politically undesirable were given much choice. In some of these new settlements, the people enjoyed an improved standard of living, especially in terms of the social services provided. Schools and dispensaries were features of each center. On the other hand, in spite of the fact that each family had its own plot of land for a garden and farmed an additional amount of land, even after two years many, possibly most, of these new communities were still dependent on the Saigon government for additional subsidies.<sup>28</sup> Economic viability was not a top priority. Furthermore, even if one discounts the lack of progress in the agricultural-economic fields, the Land Development Centers did not prove to be anything like the settlements that Diem envisaged. Infiltration from the north seems to have been in no way inhibited by these settlements, and many of the settlements actually became easy

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26. William Henderson, "Opening of New Lands and Villages, 130.

27. For a through outline of the goals and initial results of the Land Development Program, see Gilbert Jonas, "Agricultural and Land Development Achievements in the Republic of Vietnam Since 1956," Background Paper for Public Relations Counsel, Embassy of the Republic of Vietnam, 11-16, Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Center and Archive, John Donnell Collection, Box 06, Folder 08, Item Number: 0720608009, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/072/0720608009.pdf>.

28. Gilbert Jonas, "Agricultural and Land Development Achievements in the Republic of Vietnam Since 1956," 11-16.

targets for Viet Cong terrorism from 1968 on. It is also quite likely that the centers themselves were susceptible to Viet Cong infiltration, and it is conceivable that whole centers may, in reality, have been under Viet Cong control.<sup>29</sup>

Although the Government of Vietnam planned to construct additional Land Development Centers in 1960, Diem did not pursue the program any further. As early as 1959 his attention began again to shift geographically: the Delta was the next area on which Diem chose to focus Vietnamese pacification efforts. Rather than building on the concepts of the Land Development Program and perhaps modifying them in the light of actual experience, Diem created a new program, Agroville, which was formally announced in July 1959.

### **The Agroville Program**

On July 7, 1959, the fifth anniversary of Ngo Dinh Diem's accession to power, the Agroville Program was formally inaugurated as the next step in South Vietnam's rural pacification effort. Diem had solved his early political problems, and he enjoyed the generous support of the United States whose aid kept the country on its feet and contributed to what many would consider spectacular gains in the field of economic recovery. A constitution had been written and elections for the National Assembly were held. On the surface, South Vietnam in 1959 was indeed "one of the more stable countries in Southeast Asia."<sup>30</sup> On the economic side,

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29. "The dissolution of the Land Development Centers began with the infiltration of cadre from the Viet Cong district-level organization. Evidence is presented by the respondents that agents of the Viet Cong already existed among the ranks of the pioneer families that originally came to the centers. Viet Cong propaganda cadre came to the centers to muster support, at first occasionally, and later, every night. The Land Development Centers were rather abruptly abandoned by the GVN as the Viet Cong extended their control to the vicinity of the centers, whereupon the Viet Cong immediately moved in and took over their administration," quoted in "Land Reform in Vietnam Working Papers," Volume III: The Viet Cong, (Menlo Park, CA: Stanford Research Institute, 1968), 32. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/232/2321916002a.pdf>.

30. John T. Dorsey, Jr., South Vietnam in Perspective, *Far Eastern Survey*, Vol. XXVII, no.12 (December 1958), 177. To better understand the conditions existing in South Vietnam prior to the formation of the National Liberation Front, see Joseph J. Zasloff, "Rural Resettlement in Vietnam: An Agroville in Development," (Washington, DC: Department of State, Agency for International Development, 1963). <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/msu/6-20-AC5-116-1490203001.pdf>.

the statistical evidence from 1954–59 presented an encouraging picture of economic expansion. The successful resettlement of the refugees from the north was a dramatic achievement, although its success was primarily due to American aid. Agricultural production had increased, new schools and dispensaries had been built, and roads and bridges repaired; the country seemed on its way to further economic stability.

Although there were no serious political contenders for the presidency, there was some dissatisfaction and dissent among the urban population. In part, this was due to Diem's increasing reliance on his family—brother Ngo Dinh Nhu was his “Political Councilor” and brother Ngo Dinh Can was the most powerful figure in central Vietnam. In addition, the fact that Diem would tolerate no legitimate political opposition hastened the process of political alienation on the part of many of the country's intellectuals, who were among the people he needed most.<sup>31</sup>

The only legal political organizations were those approved by the government—the Personalist Labor Revolutionary Party (Can Lao), the National Revolutionary Movement, and the National Revolutionary Civil Servants League.<sup>32</sup> Can Lao, created by Ngo Dinh Nhu in 1956, was based on Personalism philosophy, which “as espoused by Nhu, was a peculiar mixture of Western and Eastern thought that pretended to stress the development of individual character as the basis of community democracy in Vietnam. It sought to mesh the individual's spiritual growth with the community's social needs, and together these would stimulate the nation's

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31. “Biographic Data on Ngo Dinh Diem Family, 1955-63,” Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 08—Biography, Box 12, Folder 10, Item Number: 2361210051, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/236/2361210051.pdf>.

32. Robert G. Scigliano, “Political Parties in South Vietnam under the Republic,” Vietnam Center and Archive, Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Other Manuscripts— American Friends of Vietnam, Box 09, Folder 37, Item Number: 1780937026, 1960. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/178/1780937026.pdf>.

emerging political life.”<sup>33</sup> Personalism was a vague and difficult-to-define ideology which combined Western individualism with collectivist ideas and translated the whole into the Vietnamese idiom as an answer to the Communist challenge. In his speeches, Nhu often spoke of “a new life achieved within the framework of personalism. . . . and the transformation of strategic hamlets into centers of democratic civilization, into generators of combatants and heroes, whose light will flood the entire country.”<sup>34</sup> Imitating the Communist, as well as the classical Confucian-mode of expression in dealings with the masses, Nhu employed a set of three slogans made up of three catchwords each. The three basic purposes of Personalism comprised the “Three Sufficiencies”—self-sufficiency in organization, self-sufficiency in equipment, and self-sufficiency in ideology. The Three Sufficiencies were to be instructed by the “Three Enlightenments—Morality, Knowledge, and Mettle—which constitute the “Three Motivations” of the Personalist revolution.<sup>35</sup> The single most distinguishing feature of Personalism, and one that was clearly present in the Strategic Hamlet Program, was its emphasis on individual self-reliance.<sup>36</sup> It was Nhu’s conviction that the Vietnamese people must do for themselves what they wanted to be done. This did not mean that they were to be ignored by the government, but that the goal of the program should be to prepare the people as quickly as possible to shoulder the burden of their own defense and development. These three Strategic

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33. Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution*, 130. For a further discussion of Personalism, see John C. Donnell, “Personalism in Vietnam,” in Fishel, *Problems of Freedom*, 26–29.

34. For a discussion of Nhu’s political philosophy, see “The Political Factor in Pacification,” Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Vincent Puritano Collection, Box 01, Folder 22, Item Number: 21470122001, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2147/21470122001.pdf>. See also “45. Despatch from the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State,” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960*, Vietnam, Vol. I, December 22, 1958. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v01/d45>.

35. For a better understanding of why both Diem and Nhu placed such political importance on Diem’s Person Dignity Theory (Personalism), see Robert Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution: The US in Vietnam, 1946-1966* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 131; Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 80; and *Pentagon Papers*, Vol.1, 283–314.

36. *The Lost Revolution*, 131; *Cold War Mandarin*, 80; *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 283-314; and “45. Despatch from the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbrow) to the Department of State.”

Hamlet Program objectives were well understood by Ngo Dinh Nhu, who was mainly responsible for the plan's direction and supervision as well as its formal articulation. Nhu believed that his political philosophy, Personalism, would provide an important ingredient in the program, somewhat analogous to the ideology that helped bind the enemy cadres into a dedicated and effective force.<sup>37</sup> The Can Lao, however, functioned not as a political party in the usual sense of the word, but rather as Nhu's secret political intelligence agency to spy on anyone suspected of Communist sympathies or anyone showing oppositionist tendencies. Its membership consisted of trusted government employees occupying key positions, "as well as individuals, carefully selected by Nhu, who moved anonymously through all the echelons of government, down to the level of villages and hamlets, factories, schools, and small military units, tracking down cases of malfeasance and corruption and disloyalty to the regimen."<sup>38</sup>

The National Revolutionary Movement (NRM) in reality was simply another instrument of control over the government administration. It was, in other words, an adjunct of the regime.<sup>39</sup> Designed to mobilize support for the government and to indoctrinate the population, the NRM's leadership consisted of high-ranking government officials. Provinces were usually headed by chiefs, district information chiefs, and village political commissioners—all of them appointed by and representing the government.<sup>40</sup> Like Can Lao, the NRM was also organized along Communist lines with ultimate control resting in the hands of Diem's brothers.

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37. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 128–59.

38 Shaplen, *The Lost Revolution*, 130–31.

39. To better understand the bewildering array of political parties within South Vietnam (and their demise), see Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, Vol 2, 1234–52.

40. Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, Vol. 2, 948.

The Civil Servants League was the vehicle for the maintenance of the support of the government bureaucracy. Membership in the league was “practically concomitant of government employment,” the second largest occupation group in the country.<sup>41</sup>

Thus organizations such as these, designed to control important segments of the population rather than to foster in them a sense of real participation in the political life of the country and to give them a stake in its future, merely tended to create conditions of further political alienation and resentment. Some of the methods Diem used to deal with his opponents not only exacerbated the gap between the government and the South Vietnamese people, but actually gave the Communists causes to champion. Opponents of the Diem regime who were financially unable to leave the country often ended up in either in government’s jails and political reeducation centers or in underground anti-Diem groups.<sup>42</sup>

By 1959 the security situation in the countryside, especially in the rice-rich Delta, had deteriorated to the point that stiffer measures bordering on police-state tactics were resorted to. In a five-year span, the country had teetered on the brink of civil war from 1954–55, to relative quiet from 1956–57, and back to increasing insecurity from 1956–59.<sup>43</sup>

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41. Scigliano, *South Vietnam*, 8.

42. For a fascinating (and rather jaundiced) view of some of the methods Diem and his brother used to first gain, and then consolidate, power, see Hilaire du Berrier, “The South Vietnam Americans Never Hear Of,” Economic Council Letter 1930–1957, No. 420, December 1, 1957, Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Michigan State University Archives & Historical Collections, John A. Hannah Papers, Box 42, Folder 52, Item Number: 6-20-18DE-116-UA2-1-12\_000075, December 1, 1957. [https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/msu/6-20-18DE-116-UA2-1-12\\_000075.pdf](https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/msu/6-20-18DE-116-UA2-1-12_000075.pdf).

43. In the wake of the Tet Offensive, the American Congress recognized that the data provided by both the South Vietnamese government and the American military was suspect and did not provide an accurate picture of what was going on in South Vietnam. To address this shortcoming, a program called the Hamlet Evaluation System was instituted to systemize reporting criteria as a means of better evaluating reports coming out of the field. For a background of the method American officers used to assess the degree of the Saigon government’s control of the Vietnamese countryside, see Honorable John V. Tunney, “Measuring Hamlet Security in Vietnam,” Congress, US Senate, Committee on Foreign Relations, 90th Cong. H. Res. 179 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1969), <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/223/2234310008.pdf>.



## Organization of the Agrovillage Program

The Agrovillage Program was formally announced by President Diem in his nationwide anniversary speech of July 7, 1959.

This year I propose to create densely populated settlement areas in the countryside, where conditions are favorable to communication and sanitation and where minimum facilities for the grouping of farmers living in isolation and destitution in the back county exist. These settlement areas will not only improve the life of the rural population, but they will also constitute the economic units which will play an important role in the future development of the country as a whole.<sup>44</sup>

Diem further stated that the Agrovilles would provide a framework for the social and economic development of the countryside. Each new settlement would provide schools, medical facilities, electricity, and other social services for its inhabitants. New crops would be cultivated, and training would be provided in modern agricultural methods, artisan activity, and manufacturing.<sup>45</sup> Diem envisioned that the Agrovilles would provide “the happy compromise between hustling, teaming city life and the placid rural existence . . . a French term was coined for the centers—*ville charniere* (hinge city).”<sup>46</sup>

According to Thao, who was later put in charge of the security aspects of the Agrovilles, the Agrovillage Program was to be part of a broad security plan for the whole country. The plan consisted of four basic elements:

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44. Quoted in Zasloff, “Rural Resettlement in Vietnam,” 7.

45. Zasloff, “Rural Resettlement in Vietnam,” 7.

46. Department of State, The Pentagon Papers, *U.S.- Vietnam Relations, 1945-67*, 12 Vols. (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971), Book 2, IV.A.5, Tab 2, 57–58. Declassified 2014/02/27. <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP80R01720R001200090001-5.pdf>.

1. ***Regroupment of the Population into Agrovilles.*** The Agrovilles were to be constructed along a new strategic road system in the Delta. Two new roads were to be built in the Camau Peninsula, and the canals, which were overgrown with trees and shrubbery, were to be cleaned out and improved. By building Agrovilles along these improved transportation routes, increased protection would be afforded the rural population.

2. ***Development of a Competent Local Administration.*** It was hoped that improved security and living standards in the Agrovilles would stimulate more competent people to settle as village leaders. Apparently, many local officials were incompetent, dishonest, and inefficient and the rural population often would not support them or be sympathetic toward the Saigon government. It was hoped that paying higher salaries would also attract more competent local officials.

3. ***Economic Development.*** It was also anticipated that the Agrovillage Program would stimulate economic development in the countryside by increasing agricultural production in the rice fields, as well as by developing public lands. The public lands in each Agrovillage were to be given over to raising fruit trees, growing vegetables, and perhaps keeping a few animals. Each Agrovillage would also have a central pond in which the inhabitants could raise fish and have a market center. Thus, it was expected that the Agrovilles would provide additional sources of village revenue. The Government of Vietnam hoped that the increased security provided by the Agrovillage would permit it to collect more taxes—the Viet Cong was then thought to be a major inhibitor of the government's tax collection effort. Yet another economic consideration behind the Agrovillage Program was the

reduction of certain public expenditures. By regrouping the scattered rural population into larger communities, the Government of Vietnam believed it would not be necessary to build as many schools and medical facilities.

4. *Organization of the Youth.* Young men between the ages of 18 and 35 were to be organized into groups whose initial task would be to assist in the actual construction of the Agrovillage. Later these young men would serve as the Agrovillage's voluntary self-defense force, replacing the traditionally paid guards. These groups were expected to stimulate community development efforts to inspire a sense of pride in the Agrovillage inhabitants, and finally to accede to administrative positions within the village or Agrovillage hierarchy.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Agrovillage Program Envisioned**

A model Agrovillage, based on the Vi Thanh-Hoa Luu Agrovillage was designed by an internationally recognized Vietnamese architect to have the following characteristics (which might not necessarily be typical): Each regrouped family was to have about an acre of land on which would contain a substantial house modeled after one of four standard types. The land was being used for vegetables and fruit, with coconuts to become the prime fruit crop. During the growing season, the farmer would return to his own farm, anywhere from two to five kilometers away, to cultivate rice, but his family would remain within the Agrovillage for protection. Surplus labor in the Agrovillages would be devoted to handicrafts and cottage industries.<sup>48</sup>

In addition, the Government of Vietnam planned to construct "agglomerated hamlets" which were to be smaller editions of Agrovillages with a capacity of 1,000 to 1,500 persons each. Two identifiable financing sources for the Agrovillage Program budget were provided by the

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47. Zasloff, "Rural Resettlement in Vietnam," 30-33.

48. Zasloff, "Rural Resettlement in Vietnam," 10-11. See also *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 128-59.

Commissariat for Civic Action and from a special contingency and reserve account. In addition, funds from the National Lottery were to augment the construction budget.<sup>49</sup> The principal construction materials for administrative and commercial buildings were reinforced concrete, tile, and cement-plastered brick. Such buildings included a school, hospital, market, and hotel, and for esthetic reasons, were to look substantial as well as pleasing to the eye. Elaborate artificial lakes were envisioned to add beauty to the city centers.

### **Limitations of the Agrovillage Program**

Although President Diem laid considerable stress on the socio-economic aspects of the Agrovillage Program, the real outcome was much different:

Even if the program did promote physical security, its much-touted provision for economic and social development remains uncertain. The promised social services—schools, maternity clinics, dispensaries—could have been as easily provided, in most cases, to the people in their traditional living arrangement. Tan Luoc, for example, was a village where the dwellings were relatively closely grouped so that most children would have only a short walk to a new school. At Caisan, people were brought into the agrovillage from a radius of six kilometers, a distance not at all unreasonable for a clinic to serve. The regrouped peasant was then obliged to walk a good distance to his rice fields, and he could not maintain his former vigil against rodents, thieves, and intemperate weather; yet, the radical alteration of the living pattern did not seem to offer significant economic advantage. The fundamental agricultural system remained unchanged. Possibly

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49. "169. Despatch From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbow) to the Department of State," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960, Vietnam*, Vol. I, No. 426, Saigon, June 6, 1960. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v01/d169>.

fruit orchards, fish cultivation, and home artisan activity would have been strengthened with training programs that might be initiated with agroville living. On balance, however, it appears that the economic and social contribution of the agrovilles was grossly overestimated. The heavy human costs incurred in their construction seem hardly to be compensated by the promise of better living standards.<sup>50</sup>

On July 7, 1959, the Government of Vietnam launched its “prosperity and density centers”—the “Agroville” Program—and Ngo Dinh Nhu and his wife leaped into organizing rural youth, women, and farmers’ organizations. The US assessment of March 1960 cited widespread abuse of police powers by local officials for extortion and vendetta and pointed out that arbitrary and corrupt local officials compromised Government of Vietnam efforts to root out the Viet Cong undercover cadres. Moreover,

While the Government of Vietnam has made an effort to meet the economic and social needs of the rural populations through community development, the construction of schools, hospitals, roads, etc., these projects appear to have enjoyed only a measure of success in creating support for the government and, in fact, in many instances have resulted in resentment. Basically, the problem appears to be that such projects have been imposed on the people without adequate psychological preparation in terms of the benefits to be gained. Since most of these projects call for sacrifice on the part of the population (in the form of allegedly “volunteer” labor in the case of construction, time away from jobs or school labor in the case of rural youth groups, leaving homes and lands in the case

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50. Zasloff, “Rural Resettlement in Vietnam,” 26.

of regrouping isolated peasants), they are bound to be opposed unless they represent a partnership effort for mutual benefit on the part of the population and the government.<sup>51</sup>

“The situation may be summed up in the fact that the government has tended to treat the population with suspicion or to coerce it and has been rewarded with an attitude of apathy or resentment.”<sup>52</sup> The Viet Cong also attempted to intimidate local officials responsible for implementing the Agrovillage Program. One source quoted in Zasloff’s “Rural Redevelopment” stated, “they cannily selected for special punishment those officials who were active in Agrovillage work and also unpopular among the villagers.”

Several threatening letters were sent to local officials warning them to cease implementing the Agrovillage Program:

While facing failure the Americans and Diem have a more dangerous plot. They are building Agrovilles everywhere. Agrovilles are big prisons and hells on earth. When these Agrovilles are completed, they will concentrate the peace-loving, patriotic families there in order to exploit their wealth [and] to draft young men so that they have enough forces to start the invasion of the North, causing bloody killing among brothers. . . .

You are very efficient in recruiting workers for Agrovilles. In this undertaking, you and the hamlet chief accept bribes from the people. If someone wishes to remain home, he pays you privately, such as in the fourth collection of pay in lieu of work on March 27, 1960. You have forced many (93) people to work at Tan Luce Agrovillage. Some of them who have not yet finished with their farming work

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51. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 314–46.

52. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 314–46.

came to you to ask for a cancellation and you threatened to bring them to the village council to settle the matter and you accepted bribes from those who stayed home. There were people who had to pay you four times in lieu of work. Besides bribes in cash, you and the hamlet secretary accepted bribes in kind such as mangoes, vegetables, tea, etc. . . .

On behalf of the revolution and the people, we, the commanding staff of Company 256 of the Battalion Ly Thuong Kiet, once again order you to stop your servant job. . . .

If you violate this order, the revolution and the people will not guarantee your life nor your property. . . .<sup>53</sup>

Looking back, several factors combined to defeat the Agroville Program, chief among them the Vietnamese peasants' traditional attachment to their ancestral homes and family tombs. The peasants resented the forced abandonment of their homes, particularly the move to undeveloped locations sometimes far from their rice paddies and gardens. They were also enraged at having to provide the labor to construct communal facilities without compensation. Although the president's technical advisers assured him that the government had the resources to pay for the labor, Diem refused to authorize compensation. The peasants also had to build their own houses, and the 300 piasters provided by the government were rarely sufficient to cover costs. The resentment occasioned by the disruption facilitated Viet Cong support and recruiting.<sup>54</sup> For unknown reasons sometime in 1961, the plan appears to have been simply abandoned. Although no formal announcement of termination was made, new construction was

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53. Zasloff, "Rural Resettlement," 23.

54. Zasloff, "Rural Resettlement in Vietnam," 9–10.

no longer initiated and the government's effort to convince the peasants to continue to move ceased.<sup>55</sup>

As to the economic viability of the Agrovillage, US Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow posed this question, "Will the advantages of markets, schools, recreation centers, maternity wards, hospitals, and security protection be sufficient to keep the people contented for at least the 5 years until the coconut crop comes in and they receive something approaching the predicted 40,000VN\$ annual income?" In his analysis, the answer at least for at the beginning was no.<sup>56</sup>

Durbrow's dispatch to the State Department provided a critique of the Agrovillage Program that cast doubt as to the cost and effectiveness of the effort:

The concept of agglomeration villages is a complete reversal of tradition and the social and economic pattern of the people affected. It is apparent that all planning and decisions have been made without their participation and with little if any consideration of their wishes, interests or views.<sup>57</sup>

Security in the whole region was reported to be far from good. As reported, it is already relatively unsafe after dark, the Agrovillage, with its captive concentration of population, could be subject to night infiltration, subversion, and propaganda from the surrounding vacant lands.<sup>58</sup>

A review of historical documents of the era indicates that the Government of Vietnam did not discuss the Agrovillage Program with US embassy officials until well after the decision had been made to initiate the program. One source has commented that Diem deliberately refrained from discussing preliminary plans for the Agrovilles with the Americans because of the criticism

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55. Spector, *Advice and Support*, 333.

56. "169. Despatch From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbow) to the Department of State."

57. "169. Despatch From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbow) to the Department of State."

58. "169. Despatch From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbow) to the Department of State."



he had received from USOM over the Land Development Centers.<sup>59</sup> USOM and USAID also seemed to have relied strongly on the South Vietnamese for information concerning the Agrovillage Program, as well as on other developments in the country. While the United States diplomatic mission to South Vietnam had a great stake in the stability of the countryside, there were few Americans in the rural areas able to verify what was actually going on.

### **Final Analysis of the Agrovillage Program**

By the end of 1960, the Government of Vietnam had ceased actively promoting the Agrovillage Program as the answer to the deteriorating internal security situation in South Vietnam. Although Diem and Nhu both cited other reasons for the government's decision to terminate the program, it seems apparent that a combination of a continuing erosion of security in the countryside (owing to increased activity by the Viet Cong) and a general failure of the Agrovillage Program to achieve its advertised objectives resulted in this decision. Although the Government of Vietnam never officially dropped the program, it was gradually allowed to lapse. Once the Government of Vietnam stopped pushing new construction, the people were dissatisfied and drifted back to their original villages, moved to larger cities, or simply left and became refugees.

In an effort to shore up internal support within the population, it seems apparent that the Government of Vietnam confused the end of the program with the means of achievement. It concentrated on the potential security offered almost to the exclusion of all other aspects of the program. This gave the impression that confining peasants within fortified compounds of itself was expected to provide security. To be sure, President Diem envisaged the Agrovillages as providing the framework for a social revolution in the countryside, but he expected this would occur spontaneously.

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59. "169. Despatch From the Ambassador in Vietnam (Durbow) to the Department of State."

The chief failure of the Agrovillage Program was in the haphazard way it was implemented. Upon reflection, the Agrovillage concept was fundamentally unsuitable to the people of the Delta, who preferred to live in a scattered fashion.<sup>60</sup> Yet, it can also be argued that if the government had taken account of the peasants' initial skepticism and had shown more of an interest in their reactions, the Agrovillage Program might have been able to provide the population an alternative to the Viet Cong. From the very beginning, however, it seemed obvious that the government had never examined the basic assumptions of the program and acted without the consent of its own people. Barring the placing of armed guards to keep the people from leaving, the program was doomed to fail.

From the outset, it was clear that the peasants did not like the idea of having to leave their traditional homes near their ancestral graves and the village shrine.<sup>61</sup> As Bernard Fall remarked,

The peasant was disturbed by the prospect of uprooting his home, sheltered by trees which offered shade and fruit, quitting his ancestral tombs, separating himself from his rice fields and his garden. He was compelled to abandon a traditional pattern of life for a fresh start in an uninviting site; he was obliged to build a new home, plant young trees and till a fallow plot which he had not chosen but was required to buy.<sup>62</sup>

Another weakness of the program was that the Government of Vietnam forced all the peasants within a certain radius of the Agrovillage to relocate, rather than only those who lived in the immediate area, as was originally planned. Since the Government of Vietnam decided not to build the smaller Argo-hamlets, those living rather far from the Agrovillage were simply forced to

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60. Zasloff, "Rural Resettlement," 23.

61. Zasloff, "Rural Resettlement," 25.

62. Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams*, 439.

move in. In addition, many Agrovilles were inaugurated and its inhabitants relocated before the promised facilities were completed. Since the government had hoped to sell the Agrovilles to the peasants based on improvements in their standard of living, the lack of such improvements did little to bolster the peasants' confidence in either the Agrovillage Program or the government and had the effect of producing greater resentment.

Probably the single most important factor in causing the dissatisfaction of the peasants stemmed from the government's insistence on the use of forced labor to construct the Agrovilles. Diem insisted that there would be no form of monetary compensation to the peasants or to even provide food, work implements, or transportation to the farmers. Local officials responsible for implementing the program also used forceful methods to compel the people to participate, thus alienating the very people the Agrovilles were designed to protect and help. In theory, the physical labor required to build the Agrovilles was to be performed after the farmers had planted their rice and while they were waiting for the crops to mature. In practice, however, local officials wishing to please Saigon insisted that the work be done in conformity with arbitrarily decided schedules regardless of the effect on the people. Often, the call to participate in the building of these settlements occurred at harvest time or during the planting season and took the farmers away from their rice fields.

The reports made by American observers on-the-ground reveal that no provisions were made for adapting various aspects of the program to peculiar local conditions. The Saigon government, as has been mentioned, developed a single master plan for the entire program.<sup>63</sup> Direct orders were sent down to the province chiefs who in turn addressed them to the appropriate district chiefs, village chiefs, and the ARVN officers in charge of the Agrovillage

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63. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 128-59.

construction plan.<sup>64</sup> There seems to have been no active participation of local officials in either the planning or construction phases of the program. Furthermore, there was little coordination between the central government and local authorities regarding implementation—a major weakness of such a complex and elaborate program.<sup>65</sup> Additionally, few province or district chiefs fully explained the problems associated with implementing the program to their bosses in Saigon. Diem was apparently unaware of the degree of peasant dissatisfaction and resentment created by the Agrovilles. Local officials told him only what they thought he wanted to hear, and since they were under constant pressure to meet the deadlines imposed on them, most did not dare criticize or report unfavorably on the progress of the program. In what turned out to be a sad but prescient observation Sir Roger Thompson later claimed that the very absence of attacks was an indicator that the Viet Cong had succeeded in infiltrating the hamlets.<sup>66</sup>

That Diem's Agrovillage Program was a dismal failure is demonstrated that it could die without any explanation after causing disruptions to the very people it was envisioned to help. The most conspicuous feature behind its failure was the fact that the Government of Vietnam never really understood what was necessary to make it work. The forced relocation, use of coerced labor, and the arbitrary and offensive behavior of most of the officials responsible for the program produced greater peasant resentment and antagonism toward the central government than perhaps did the terroristic activities of the Viet Cong. Such results provided the Viet Cong with readily exploitable issues for exploitation which were vital to the fledgling insurgency. The Government of Vietnam failed to recognize that the Viet Cong were attracting local support because of the government's policies; many people during this time joined the Viet Cong or at

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64. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 128–59.

65. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 128–59.

66. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 128–59.

least gave tacit support to them in protest against the government. The rural population of South Vietnam, which during those early years represented something close to ninety percent of the total population, was the focal point of the enemy's strategy, but not the center of the government's attention.

### **Viet Minh Remnants in South Vietnam**

Although Diem had quickly gained control of the army in 1954, his methods of dealing with the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao sects and the Binh Xuyen resulted in many of their members turning to informal alliances with the Viet Minh. To be sure, Diem could not have tolerated autonomous rival governments. After he successfully bought off or crushed their private armies, he apparently made no overtures to seek their support.<sup>67</sup> Thus, thousands of their forces had fled to the forests and the mountains, taking their weapons with them. Many of them remained there, "living by the gun, preying on hapless peasants, or cooperating with the Viet Cong agents to harass the Government."<sup>68</sup> But it was an anti-Diemist attitude rather than a pro-Communist one which attracted them to this life.

Although the regular, organized military units of the Viet Minh had withdrawn to the north following the Geneva Conference, many Communist cadres and other non-Communist elements of the Viet Minh remained in the south.<sup>69</sup> In parts of the country it grew even stronger, in part because the French withdrew from many regions before Diem's army and administration were ready to establish control.<sup>70</sup> Much of the Delta, particularly the Camau Peninsula and the Quang Ngai and Binh Dinh Provinces, were areas in which Viet Minh control was particularly strong, although they were beginning to expand organizationally throughout the country.

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67. Pike, *Viet Cong*, 73.

68. Wesley R. Fishel, "Vietnam's War of Attrition," *New Leader*, Vol. XLII, no. 45 (7 December 1959): 19.

69. Pike, *Viet Cong*, 75 It was estimated that these forces numbered 10,000.

70. Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, Vol. 2, 973.

Both the sects and the Viet Minh continued to use acts of violence to harass the Government of Vietnam. According to Douglas Pike:

Violence in the countryside was not uncommon, although until at least mid-1958 there was no guerrilla warfare in South Vietnam, in the generally accepted definition of the term. The government ascribed most of the terror and violence to remnants of the Viet Minh, but how could anyone know for sure whether an incident in a remote village was the work of the Viet Minh, the armed sects, bandits, or someone engaged in personal revenge?<sup>71</sup>

### **Security Efforts to Counter Viet Cong Terrorist Activities**

Security continued to remain a problem and the general trend, starting in 1958, seemed to be worsening.<sup>72</sup> According to official Government of Vietnam reports to the US Embassy in 1958, a total of 193 South Vietnamese officials or villagers openly loyal to Diem were assassinated by the Viet Cong. In 1959, the Viet Cong murdered 239 bureaucrats and village leaders. In 1960, that number rose to 1,400 and to 1,600 in 1961, with another 2,500 kidnapped in 1960 and 1961.<sup>73</sup> Observers generally agreed that the Viet Cong were becoming more effective in their use of terror because the victims were persons of generally greater importance, holding positions as village councilors, hamlet chiefs, and district chiefs. The Delta was confirmed to have the highest incident of terrorism.<sup>74</sup>

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71. Pike, *Viet Cong*, 75.

72. "Origins of Insurgency in South Vietnam," 52, Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 02—Military Operations, Box 01, Folder 01, Item Number: 2130101007, 26 September 1959. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/213/2130101007.pdf>. Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics*, 39.

73. Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics*, 39.

74. Department of State, The Pentagon Papers, Book 2, IV.A.5, Tab 2, 57–58.

In an effort to cope with the situation, the Government of Vietnam sought more effective and sterner measures. Mobile strike teams composed of a combination of the Civil Guard, police, and sometimes ARVN elements were organized to work under the control of province chiefs, in coordination with the regional military commanders, to attack suspected Viet Cong.

Understanding that an effort must be made to counter the Communists' recruitment in the countryside, Diem inaugurated a new pacification plan that was ultimately to give way to the Agroville Program. Because this new program lasted but a few months and was largely experimental, it had no formal title. "Agglomeration centers plan" was the term generally applied. As envisioned, this program recalled efforts by the French in the Red River Delta during the last stages of the First Indochina War to move peasants into compact communities for protection.<sup>75</sup> In February 1959, the Diem government sought to apply this technique in the more remote and inaccessible regions of the Delta where the Viet Cong maintained strong control. The terrain of this area, particularly the south and southwest sections, with their rice paddies and swamps crisscrossed by a vast network of canals and impenetrable jungle, had long been a refuge for the Viet Minh, remnants of the defeated religious sects, and bandits.<sup>76</sup> Most of the inhabitants lived in small groups of huts clustered together in the middle of rice paddies and often separated by as much



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Figure 16. American soldiers moving through a rice paddy.

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75. Department of State, The Pentagon Papers, 30.

76. Zasloff, "Rural Resettlement in Vietnam," 6.

as a mile from the next cluster. Communication and transportation between these little islands were difficult, and the peasants were especially vulnerable to Viet Cong propaganda and terror.

To combat this situation, two types of collection centers were envisaged. The purpose behind both was the physical separation of the Viet Cong from the rest of the population. One type of center would regroup the so-called Viet Cong families into special zones where they could be closely watched by government authorities.<sup>77</sup> Although the criteria for defining Viet Cong families were vague, the families included in this category were those who were former members of the Viet Minh, those having relatives in North Vietnam, and those who were either suspected of being Viet Cong cadres or of sympathizing with them. The other type of collection center was for loyal, patriotic, reliable families who were seen as actual or potential targets of the Viet Cong. These families were to be regrouped into centers where they would receive government protection and would not be in a position, willingly or unwillingly, to lend any support to the Viet Cong.<sup>78</sup> Initially, it was planned to establish the centers near each other to make it easier to protect them. In fact, security was the sole justification for the centers; the economic and social improvements were virtually ignored. Peasants were forced to move from their traditional homesteads to strange and unfamiliar places where, “often far from their rice fields, they were expected to reestablish their lives with only minimal assistance from the government.”<sup>79</sup> The regrouped peasants predictably reacted with a unanimous protest. Loyal families felt that they had been mistreated and subjected to economic hardships. The Viet Cong families claimed to be innocent of charges of association with Communists—having relatives in

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77. Zasloff, “Rural Resettlement in Vietnam,” 6.

78. Zasloff, “Rural Resettlement in Vietnam,” 6.

79. Zasloff, “Rural Resettlement in Vietnam,” 6.



the north hardly justified being placed in what amounted to a concentration camp. Bitter protests were lodged by many high-ranking families who had relatives living in North Vietnam.<sup>80</sup>

In March 1959 Major Pham Ngoc Thao, who was responsible for developing the Agrovillage Program, was appointed by Diem to study the progress of the centers and to investigate its problems. In his report to Diem, Thao stressed the difficulties of distinguishing between genuine Viet Minh and nationalist families. Most of the inhabitants of South Vietnam had some connection with either the north or with the resistance (past or present) in the south. Thao was also critical of the concentration of these two groups of families into separate areas, observing that “we grouped our enemies and gave them more reason to be against us.”<sup>81</sup> He also stated, “we grouped our friends without regard for economic and social considerations. We gave them a reason to be unhappy with their lot and turn against us.”<sup>82</sup> In concluding his report, Thao suggested that if the concentration of people was to be continued, there should be no segregation of families based on political beliefs.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, any future regroupment program should also consider economic and social considerations by providing living facilities, schools, hospitals, maternity clinics, and other social services to help establish better living conditions for the regrouped population.<sup>84</sup> According to Thao, his report formed the basis for the later development of the Agrovilles.

Although Thao’s report may have influenced Diem’s decision to suspend the experiments with the collection centers, there are indications that Diem’s brother, Ngo Dinh Can, and other high Government of Vietnam officials, including Vice President Nguyen Ngoc Tho and Minister

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80. Scigliano, *South Vietnam*, 179.

81. Zasloff, “Rural Resettlement in Vietnam,” 7.

82. Zasloff, “Rural Resettlement in Vietnam,” 7.

83. For example, both the Minister of Internal Affairs and Major Pham Ngoc Thao had relatives in North Vietnam. See also Zasloff, “Rural Resettlement in Vietnam,” 7.

84. Zasloff, “Rural Resettlement in Vietnam,” 7.

of Agriculture Lo Van Dong, also influenced Diem. These men believed that more emphasis should be placed on positive efforts to gain the support of the rural population rather than relying solely on the use of force. President Diem must have seen some merit in this argument. In July he announced that the government would establish “prosperity and density centers” designed “to improve rural standards of living.”<sup>85</sup>

### A Question of Priorities

By March of 1954, Diem had been able to outmaneuver Hinh, eventually sending him out of the country. Once Diem gained control over the army, he used them to help crush the rebellious opposition of the religious sects. By late 1955, using the strategy of “divide and conquer” and aided by France’s withdrawal of financial support to the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao, Diem successfully neutralized these two groups as a threat to the stability of his government.<sup>86</sup> The Binh



www.vietnam.ttu.edu ,Item Number: VA003057

Figure 17. Vietnamese from 44th Ranger battalion and American advisor, behind lead man, forge across stream.

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85. Scigliano, *South Vietnam*, 180.

86. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 179–214. “Although General Collins had considerable experience in Asia and had visited Vietnam in 1951, he was amazed and appalled at the situation that greeted him as he arrived in Saigon on November 8, 1954. General Collins found that General O’Daniel and Ambassador Heath differed on how to deal with the situation. Having worked closely with Hinh on planning for training and reorganizing the army, O’Daniel believed that the general was basically honest and patriotic and could be persuaded to cooperate with Prime Minister Diem. Ambassador Heath, on the other hand, thought that O’Daniel’s view of Hinh was that he was naive and that the Diem government’s difficulties could not be solved unless Hinh was removed,” recounted in Spector, *Advice and Support*, 234–35.

Xuyen, however, proved to be a more persistent problem. By April, after several bloody skirmishes between the two armed factions, Diem got the upper hand and managed to avert a full-scale civil war.<sup>87</sup> Following the October 1955 national referendum in which Bao Dai was deposed and his monarchy abolished, Ngo Dinh Diem proclaimed South Vietnam a republic and named himself its first president.<sup>88</sup>

Initially, Diem focused on propaganda measures designed to purify the population of its Communist sentiments. The most widely known and most important instrument in this regard was the “Anti-Communist Denunciation Campaign,” which was begun in mid-1955. In his government’s effort to combat Communist infiltration, subtlety was not a virtue.

In a typical denunciation ceremony, Viet Minh cadres and sympathizers would swear their disavowal of Communism before a large audience; the repentant would recount the atrocities of the Viet Minh and, as a climax to their performance, would rip or trample upon the Viet Minh flag and pledge their loyalty to Ngo Dinh Diem.<sup>89</sup>

Beginning in mid-1955, Diem also embarked on a campaign to counter the threat of the Viet Cong. According to Jean Lacouture, “a new enemy was substituted for the sects . . . the

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87. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 179–214. For a more nuanced recount of the workings of the Binh Xuyen and their movements against Diem, see Seth Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America’s War in Vietnam, 1950–1963* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 70–80. For the US Department of State’s account, see “146. Telegram from the Charge in Vietnam (Kidder) to the Department of State,” Saigon, April 28, 1955 in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Vietnam, Vol. I*, Department of State Central Files, 751G.00/4–2855. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v01/d146>. See also Thomas L. Ahern, Jr. “The CIA and the Government of Ngo Dinh Diem,” n.d., declassified 2014/08/10. <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/Anthology-CIA-and-the-Wars-in-Southeast-Asia/pdfs/ahern-cia-ngo-in-dinh-diem.pdf>.

88. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol.1, 179–214. For a more detailed examination of Diem’s removal of Bao Dai through a national referendum, see Buttinger, *Vietnam: A Dragon Embattled*, 889–93.

89. Robert Scigliano, *South Vietnam*, 167.

Viet Cong, or Vietnamese Communists. In 1955, every opponent had been denounced as a leftover from the “feudal rebels.” After 1956, every opponent was called a “Communist.”<sup>90</sup>

### **Military Assistance Advisory Group**

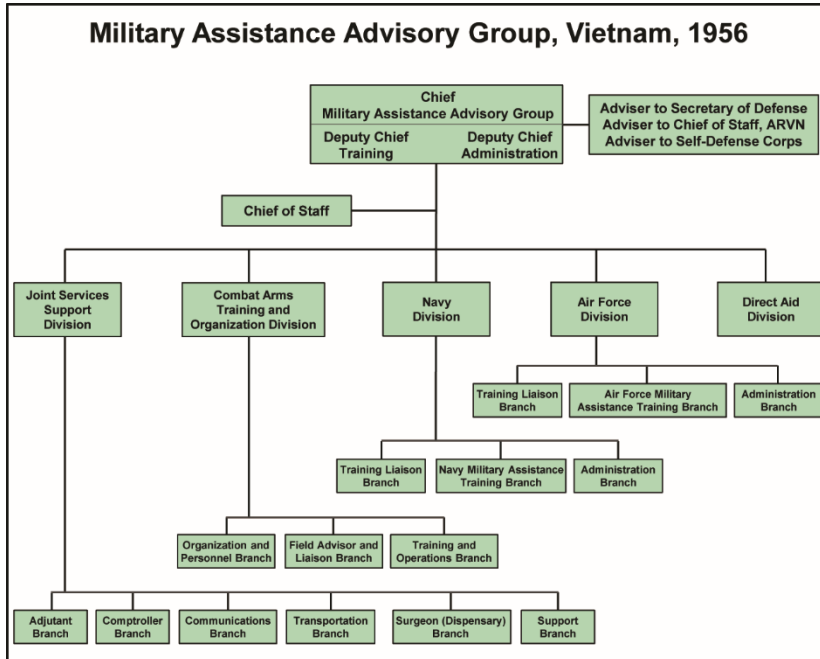
In February 1955 a Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) under General John “Iron Mike” O’Daniel, was formed to assume responsibility for training the South Vietnamese forces under the overall control of General Paul-Henri-Romuald Ely, Commander in Chief of the French Expeditionary Forces.<sup>91</sup> For most of 1955, the embryonic South Vietnamese army was involved in combat against the armies of the religious sects and scattered groups of Viet Minh irregulars. By December 1955, however, it appeared that the back of religious sects’ resistance had been broken and the scattered South Vietnamese army forces were regrouped into divisions for centralized training. With the withdrawal of the French in May 1956, the United States assumed complete responsibility for training the South Vietnamese, and in September the US training program for the regular forces commenced.

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90. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 242–69. See also Jean Lacouture, *Vietnam Between Two Truces* (New York: Random House, 1966), 29.

91. Scigliano, *South Vietnam*, 180.

Table 11. Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam, 1956.



Source: *Brief Summary of Past Significant Events*, Letter, HQ Military Assistance Advisory Group, Vietnam, 18 August 1956.

Part of the problem during this period stemmed from the fact that the United States took over the French mission of training the ARVN in 1955. Both the MAAG and President Diem saw the invasion of South Vietnam by the north as the most likely threat. Based on recent experience in Korea, the US military was confident that conventional warfare training techniques applied in Korea would prove equally effective in South Vietnam. Thus, during these early years, when the insurgency was still in its formative stages, the United States concentrated on training and equipping a rather large conventional army to withstand an overt invasion by organized NVA units. The need for smaller, less conventional security forces was not taken seriously at the time by either the MAAG or the Government of Vietnam. By the time the insurgency was recognized for what it was, the appropriate forces for dealing with the terroristic and subversive activities of the Viet Cong were not available.<sup>92</sup> To put the situation in perspective, the South

92. Quote from Douglas S. Blaufarb, *The Counterinsurgency Era U.S. Doctrine and Performance, 1950 to the Present* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 80. See also Richard Betts, *Soldiers, Statesmen, and Cold War Crises*

Vietnamese were not alone in seeing the threat to South Vietnam as an invasion from the north. Within the American Joint Chiefs of Staff, the feeling was that they could not afford to restructure it to confront counterinsurgencies without jeopardizing its other missions, including the defense of Europe and Korea. This was made clear when Army Chief of Staff General George H. Decker stated that although he did not doubt that the United States needed to be able to fight guerrillas effectively, he challenged Kennedy's assertion that conventional soldiers were incapable of defeating irregulars. He regarded such talk as excessive and ahistorical, believing instead that, with proper preparation, "any good soldier can handle guerrillas." He was not alone, as many other military leaders, including Joint Chiefs Chairman General Lyman L. Lemnitzer; the President's personal military adviser and future Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, General Maxwell D. Taylor; and Marine Corps Major General Victor H. Krulak, the Joint Chiefs' point man for counterinsurgency, shared Decker's opinion.

The problem faced by the MAAG was difficult indeed—while the fledgling South Vietnamese army was reasonably adequate in strength (142,000 men organized into four field-type divisions, six light divisions, and thirteen territorial regiments), it had serious qualitative deficiencies in the officer corps, as well as a complete lack of capability in the support branches (i.e., medical services, transportation, logistics, etc.). During the French-Indochina War, the Vietnamese forces had been heavily staffed with French officers and noncommissioned officers, and logistic support was the complete responsibility of the French.<sup>93</sup>

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(Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), 130; and Ricky Waddell, "The Army and Peacetime Low Intensity Conflict, 1961–1993: The Process of Peripheral and Fundamental Military Change," Ph.D. diss. Columbia University, 1994, 141.

93. For a concise outline of the establishment of MAAG, see "Vietnam Counterinsurgency - The Diem Era," Vietnam Center and Archive. Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 06—Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Box 12, Folder 09, Item Number: 2321209008, 1954. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/232/2321209008.pdf>.

In addition to the regular army forces, Diem had grouped various existing paramilitary units into a Civil Guard under the direction of the Minister of Interior. This force, approximately 40,000 strong and organized into lightly armed mobile companies, was to serve as a rural law-and-order force.<sup>94</sup> A local defense force of the Self-Defense Corps was also formed from existing local defense units. This organization, with an approximate strength of 60,000, was deployed in 10-man squads for local village protection.<sup>95</sup>

Basic guidance for the MAAG advisory effort naturally stemmed from the appraisal of the enemy threat. The official estimate provided by the CIA during 1956–59, was that the Communist Viet Minh organization in South Vietnam rather than the People’s Army of North Vietnam constituted the major danger.<sup>96</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, a question comes to mind of why the ARVN was organized and trained to meet a conventional invasion across the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) rather than the internal threat posed by the Communist organization in South Vietnam?<sup>97</sup> US military strategy in the mid-1950s was based on the doctrine of massive

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94. There were numerous problems with staffing the South Vietnamese Armed Forces: desertion, draft-dodging, a shortage of quality officers willing to serve outside of the Saigon area in combat units, and pervasive corruption, to name but a few. To get a clearer picture of the systemic problems of the armed forces, see Lt. Gen. Dong Van Khuyen, *The RVNAF*, Indochina Monographs (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1978), Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Garnett Bell Collection, Box 17, Folder 27, Item Number: 11271727001, 1978. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/1127/11271727001a.pdf>. To get a US perspective on what was needed to improve the effectiveness of the South Vietnamese Armed Forces, see Robert Komer “Improving ARVN Effectiveness,” December 22, 1966, Declassified 9/9/85, Texas Tech University. The Vietnam Center and Archive, Larry Berman Collection (Presidential Archives Research), Box 05, Folder 20, Item Number: 0240520003, December 22, 1966. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/024/0240520003.pdf>.

95. To obtain an understanding of the multiple organizations responsible for performing policing functions and their responsibilities within South Vietnam, see Ralph H. Smuckler, et al., “Report on the Police of Vietnam, (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group, Saigon, February 15, 1959). [https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/msu/6-20-1606-116-UA17-149\\_000098.pdf](https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/msu/6-20-1606-116-UA17-149_000098.pdf).

96. For a better understanding of the situation on the ground facing the newly established Government in South Vietnam and the CIAs assessment of both the likelihood of Diem’s survival and the main threat facing his government, see “Probable Developments in Vietnam to July 1956 - South Vietnam,” 11 October 1955. NIE: 63.1-2-55. [https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC\\_0000008010.pdf](https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000008010.pdf).

97. To understand the role of the Self-Defense Corps in the security of the villages, see “Review of Self-Defense Corps (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Viet-Nam Advisory Group, Police Division, 31 October 1957). [https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/msu/6-20-1607-116-UA17-149\\_000099.pdf](https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/msu/6-20-1607-116-UA17-149_000099.pdf).

retaliation, but at the same time the US containment policy, as evidenced in its many regional arrangements, including the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), called for the development of indigenous forces to act as a deterrent to Communist aggression. After the French defeat in 1954, the Joint Chiefs took the position that ground defense against aggression from the north would require South Vietnamese forces to hold the line until the United States could intervene with ground forces and tactical nuclear weapons and it was that mission that they were trained for.<sup>98</sup> Therefore, the role of the ARVN forces in the US Chiefs of Staff point of view was to maintain internal security and to deter Communist aggression by a limited defense of the DMZ. This view was bolstered by the withdrawal of the French Expeditionary Forces on April 1, 1956, which left South Vietnam without military protection. Diem felt strongly about the necessity of defending the DMZ, and he urged and supported the buildup of the ARVN to embrace this mission. Finally, the fact that the US military thinking had been strongly influenced by the North Korean invasion added to the general pressures for expanding the mission of the ARVN to that of defense against external invasion, despite the threat assessment which continued to maintain that the internal threat was the only significant danger.<sup>99</sup> Even though this mission statement recognized the South Vietnamese army's primary responsibility was for internal security, creating an army capable to counter a conventional invasion across the DMZ, training took precedence.

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98. See "Development and Training of Indigenous Forces in Indochina, U.S.-Vietnam Relations," Joint Chief of Staff memorandum for Secretary of Defense, 19 October 1954, Document Number: 10:773-74. See also 218th Meeting of the National Security Council Minutes, 22 October 1954, Eisenhower-as-President Papers, Eisenhower Library, cited in Spector, *Advice and Support*, 229, n. 44. See also William H. Mott, IV *Military Assistance: An Operational Perspective* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999), 247; and Department of State, *The Pentagon Papers*, Book 1, pt. IV, A.3, 9, recounted in Spector, *Advice and Support*, 229.

99. "Tenth Report of the Michigan State University Advisory Group in Public Administration to the Government of Vietnam" (Saigon, Michigan State University, Vietnam Advisory Group, December 31, 1959), 10. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/232/2321806006.pdf>.



By 1959, the ARVN had been reorganized into a force of seven light divisions, each with a strength of about 10,500. Each division was composed of three infantry regiments and one battalion of 105mm artillery, 4.2 mortar engineers, and technical logistic support companies. Three Corps Headquarters had been established for command and control of operational forces. As the security situation deteriorated under the impact of the Communist “armed struggle,” these divisions were broken down into regimental and battalion task forces and assigned to the provinces. Operations against the Communist forces, for the most part, took the form of battalion and regimental-size sweeps—which the Communists readily avoided.<sup>100</sup>

In July 1957, Diem, acting on his own conception of the Civil Guard as primarily a military rather than a police organization, asked the United States for \$60 million worth of heavy military equipment, but this recommendation was countered by Michigan State University (MSU) and the MAAG, who proposed reequipping the force with lighter weapons. In 1958, the US advisory effort gave way in part to the Government of Vietnam pressure for heavy equipment with the understanding that the Civil Guard would be removed from the president’s office and once again placed under the Ministry of Interior, as proposed by MSU. Diem, however, procrastinated, and the United States, in turn, withheld monetary assistance to the Civil Guard. Finally in January 1959, Diem gave in and transferred the Civil Guard to the Ministry of Interior.<sup>101</sup> In June 1959, the newly constituted Public Safety Division of USOM replaced the MSU team as the US advisory agency to the Civil Guard. However, this move proved temporary, since the MAAG was now convinced that the Civil Guard, by the nature of its operation, was a military element, not a police force. Eighteen months later in December 1960, on MAAG

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100. Brigadier General James Lawton Collins, Jr., *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army, 1950-1972* (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 1991), 9–12. First published as Center of Military History publication CMH Pub 90-10, 1975. <http://webdoc.sub.gwdg.de/ebook/p/2005/CMH2/www.army.mil/cmh-pg/books/vietnam/devtrainrvn/>.

101. Collins, Jr., *The Development and Training of the South Vietnamese Army*, 9.

recommendation, the Civil Guard's organizational home was shifted from the Ministry of Interior to the Ministry of National Defense, and the MAAG took over responsibility for its training from USCM.<sup>102</sup>

How the US got involved in training the South Vietnamese Army and why they agreed to it are two fascinating questions that require an extensive response. On 22 September the Joint Chiefs declared that the provisions of the Geneva cease-fire agreement would present a major obstacle to introducing a sufficient number of American training personnel and additional arms and equipment. The US Joint Chiefs of Staff went along for a number of reasons, despite their reluctance to get involved in Vietnam:

First, the American military leaders were strong-armed by high-ranking civilian government officials. Secretary John Foster Dulles and presidential assistant Robert Cutler expressed "the outspoken desire. . . to see the training program undertaken." Furthermore, "they may also have been aware that President Eisenhower himself wanted it." Only three days after the Joint Chiefs acquiesced, the President told the National Security Council that "in the land of the blind, the one-eyed men are kings. What we want is a Vietnamese force which will support Diem . . . the obvious thing to do is simply to authorize O'Daniel to use up to X millions of dollars to produce the maximum number of Vietnamese units which Prime Minister Diem can depend on to sustain himself in power."

Second, the Joint Chiefs were constrained by political considerations in regard to the American government. They stated bluntly that the creation of an effective Vietnamese Army under existing conditions was impossible while agreeing to

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102. Department of State, *The Pentagon Papers*, Part IV, A-4. See also "Tenth Report of the Michigan State University Advisory Group in Public Administration to the Government of Vietnam," 10-11.

undertake that task. In this way, the Joint Chiefs acceded to a bureaucratic compromise, to put on record the military's objections to the training program and thereby shift responsibility to the political leaders while at the same time allowing the program to proceed.

Third, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and particularly the Army staff, had recently succeeded in preventing the commitment of American combat forces in Vietnam. Having risked much, fought hard, and won the fight, Army leaders thought it foolish to quarrel over the relatively minor issue of American training assistance. As the Assistant Chief of Staff for Operations, Lieutenant General James M. Gavin, recalled, "we in the Army were so relieved that we had blocked the decision to commit ground troops to Vietnam that we were in no mood to quibble." Whatever the motives, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had agreed to a proposal that set in motion a chain of events that would soon prove irreversible.<sup>103</sup>

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103. "Development and Training of Indigenous Forces in Indochina, U.S-Vietnam Relations," Joint Chief of Staff memorandum for Secretary of Defense, 19 October 1954, Document Number: 10:773-74. See also 218th Meeting of the National Security Council Minutes, 22 October 1954, 229, n. 44, and also in Mott, *Military Assistance: An Operational Perspective*, 247. See also Department of State, The Pentagon Papers, Book 1, pt. IV, A.3, 9, recounted in Spector, *Advice and Support*, 229.

## **Diem's Final Gamble: The Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961–63**

By 1956, to the surprise of many informed observers, President Diem had succeeded in establishing control over the government and administrative machinery of the country.<sup>1</sup> South Vietnam had not only become a viable political unit, but it also registered impressive economic gains during its first few years. These developments produced optimism in Washington, as well as in Saigon. This hopeful outlook, however, reflected an inadequate awareness and assessment of the Communist threat to the country.<sup>2</sup> Both American and Vietnamese leaders viewed an invasion from North Vietnam as the major challenge to the security and viability of South Vietnam. Consequently, they emphasized the expansion of the ARVN and on training in conventional tactics. The US advisory effort, as well as the military aid program, was geared to the task of thwarting a Korean-type assault.<sup>3</sup>

It wasn't until 1959 when assassinations of local officials and overt indoctrination of villagers attracted serious attention to the fact that the country faced a threat from Communists

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1. "Background Paper on Vietnam," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 06—Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Box 15, Folder 05, Item Number: 2321505008, 13 July 1956. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/232/2321505008.pdf>.

2. "Sources of A New War, 1954-1960," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 02—Military Operations, Box 01, Folder 03, Item Number: 2130103011, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/virtualarchive/items.php?item=2130103011>.

3. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 242–69.

4. For an explanation of the impact that assassination and abductions of local officials had on the ability of Saigon to counter Viet Cong operations in 1959–72, see Clodfelter, *Vietnam in Military Statistics*, 46–47. The table lists the numbers reported from 1957–72. Although not necessarily portrayed as killings few if any of those abducted ever returned.

trained in guerrilla warfare. In many respects, this was the moment of recognition, if not reckoning, for the Government of South Vietnam.<sup>4</sup>

On 29 January 1961, Radio Hanoi announced the creation of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam. This organization had as its sacred task to overthrow of the US-Diem “clique” and liberate the south. Soon after this announcement, the Front launched a guerrilla offensive aimed at preventing the April 1961 election.<sup>5</sup>

Despite their attempts to disrupt the election, President Diem was won without serious opposition. In protest, the insurgents launched a guerrilla offensive by attacking and seizing the capital city of Phuoc Thanh Province, only 60 miles from Saigon, for a short time.<sup>6</sup> With signs of serious security deterioration in the countryside, President Diem declared a State of Emergency on October 18, 1961.<sup>7</sup> The US State Department also published a blue book, *A Threat to Peace: North Vietnam's Effort to Conquer South Vietnam*, outlining evidence that North Vietnam's leaders were the masterminds behind the growing problem of insurgency in the south: “Communists strength had grown to an estimated 9000 men organized into some 30 battalions. An additional 8000 or more troops were operating in the provinces and districts under the leadership of VC officers.”<sup>8</sup> The enemy not only had a military force but an administrative

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5. “Creation of PRG Hastens End of Saigon Regime.” Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 07, Folder 16, Item Number: 2310716040, 25 June 1969. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/231/2310716040.pdf>. For an outline for how the National Liberation Front (NLF) was organized, see “Enemy Organization for the Conduct of the War in South Vietnam.” Texas Tech University, The Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 08, Folder 12, Item Number: 2310812002, 1968. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/231/2310812002.pdf>.

6. Michael Beecher and Jonathan Wilkenfeld, *A Study in Crisis* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 185.

7. “Chronological Table of Events,” Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Dale W. Andrade Collection, Box 02, Folder 17, Item Number: 24990217001, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2499/24990217001.pdf>.

8. “A Threat to the Peace: North Viet-Nam's Effort to Conquer South Viet-Nam,” Parts 1 & 2, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 11—Monographs, Box 07, Folder 11, Item

apparatus as well. Directed at first by the southern branch of the Lao Dong Party (North Vietnam) and later by the Central Committee of the People's Revolutionary Party of South Vietnam, this apparatus was led principally by southerners. There were interzone, province, and district communities as well as village and hamlet cells, including specialized groups for liaison, propaganda, espionage, tax collection, and many other activities.<sup>9</sup>

The growth of this complex and pervasive guerrilla structure led President Kennedy to review US policy toward South Vietnam and to underline the US commitment to Ngo Dinh Diem's government.

President Kennedy dispatched the Staley (May 1961) and Taylor (October 1961) missions to South Vietnam.<sup>10</sup> After negotiations with Government of Vietnam officials, the US

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Number: 2390711005, n.d. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&op\[\]=AND&q\[\]=2390711005,&field\[\]=&commit=Search&from\\_year\[\]=&to\\_year\[\]=](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/search?utf8=%E2%9C%93&op[]=AND&q[]=2390711005,&field[]=&commit=Search&from_year[]=&to_year[]=).

9. "A Threat to the Peace," 18–24.

10. For those wishing more information on the Taylor Mission to Southeast Asia, October 15–November 3, 1961, see "173. Paper Prepared by the Taylor Mission," in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961, Volume I, Saigon, October 18., 1961*. [https://history.state.gov/historical\\_documents/frus/1961-63v01/d173](https://history.state.gov/historical_documents/frus/1961-63v01/d173). The supporting document covers a wide range of questions General Taylor (and his staff) asked as a "fact finding mission" on behalf of President Kennedy. The subjects include: Political–Social, Military, Political Warfare, Unconventional Warfare, Covert Activities, Economic, and R&D. Kennedy Library, National Security Files, Viet-Nam Country Series Taylor Report (Rostow working copy). Top Secret. There is no heading on the source text, but another copy bears the following handwritten notation on the cover sheet: "Questions Distributed by Taylor Mission for Answer by Task Force Saigon. October, 1961," (Washington National Records Center, RG 84, Saigon Embassy Files: FRC 68 A 5159, SGN (61) 19-GVN August through December). The questions were apparently given by the Taylor Mission to Embassy personnel at the briefing of the Taylor Mission by the Saigon Task Force on October 18. For those wishing additional information on the Staley mission, see *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 40–98. A few points about the Staley Mission seem useful to keep in mind in reviewing the fall process: 1) It is another reminder of the prevailing (although not universal) over optimism of US appraisals of the Vietnam problem; 2) One of the follow-on actions to the report was supposed to be a Vietnamese announcement of a program of social reform. Producing this piece of paper (and in the end it was not much more than a piece of paper) took months. It was experiences such as this that gave questions about the viability of the Diem regime greater prominence in the fall review than they had received during April and May; 3) The US was still continuing to deal with Diem most gently. Nothing more was asked of Diem as a quid pro quo than that he finally work up a plan for the counterinsurgency. The president explicitly accepted the assumptions of the Joint Plan worked out by the Staley Mission and their Vietnamese counterparts.

sharply increased US economic and military aid to help South Vietnam counter the growing insurgency.<sup>11</sup>

Between 1961 and 1963, the Government of Vietnam and the Viet Cong openly competed for the loyalty and the support of the rural population, both believing that whichever side gained this loyalty and support would emerge victorious. While The Viet Cong used terrorist tactics to sever the government's pacification effort with the peasantry in the countryside and force it to withdraw back to towns and cities, the Government of Vietnam, on the other hand, attempted to force the insurgents back into their base areas where they could be isolated and destroyed.<sup>12</sup>

To eliminate the guerrilla threat, the Diem regime turned its attention and energy to the countryside, where insecurity was widespread and government influence had been neglected. The major responsibility for the day-to-day protection of the rural population (whether regrouped into agrovilles or living in scattered hamlets) fell on the shoulders of the Civil Guard<sup>13</sup> and the

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11. The Staley Report on South Vietnam is not printed. For the letter transmitting the report, see *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, Vol. I, Document 93. For documentation on Taylor's visit to Saigon, October 18–25, 1961, see "269. Memorandum from the Vice President's Military Aide (Burris) to the Vice President," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961-1963*, Vol. II, August 17, 1962. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v02/d269>. To read the Taylor Report, see "169. The Taylor Mission to South Vietnam—October–November 1961," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 02—Military Operations, Box 02, Folder 03, Item Number: 2130203001, 15 October 1961. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/106189](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/106189). See also "173. Paper Prepared by the Taylor Mission," *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 40–98.

12. "Situation in Viet-Nam," Memorandum, Bangkok, 27 March 1961, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 02—Military Operations, Box 01, Folder 12, Item Number: 2130112022, 27 March 1961. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/213/2130112022.pdf>. See also Earl J. Young, "Stability in Rural Vietnam," 1968, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, John B. O'Donnell Collection, Box 01, Folder 41, Item Number: 13510141001, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/1351/13510141001.pdf>. See also "173. Paper Prepared by the Taylor Mission," and *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 40–98.

13. For a closer examination on the formation and development of the Civil Guard (CG), see "History of MSU Vietnam Advisory Group, "History of MSU's [sic] Police Project in Vietnam—1960, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Michigan State University Archives & Historical Collections: Ralph F. Turner Papers, Box 1694, Folder 25, Item Number: 6-20-15C1-116-UA17-149\_000029, 7 November 1957. [https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/msu/6-20-15C1-116-UA17-149\\_000029.pdf](https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/msu/6-20-15C1-116-UA17-149_000029.pdf).

Self-Defense Corps.<sup>14</sup> The Civil Guard and Self-Defense Corps were formed in 1955 and by 1961 numbered, respectively, a little more than 50,000 and 60,000. In addition to protecting important installations and population centers, the Civil Guard operated as a regional reaction force. The Self-Defense Corps' task was more narrowly defined; its main responsibility was defense of the villages and hamlets.

However, both the Self-Defense Corps and the Civil Guard were unequal to the challenge posed by the expanding insurgency. Poorly trained and equipped, as well as thinly deployed, they were easy targets at night for the aggressive Viet Cong forces. Even if they were able to protect a village, the surrounding hamlets were at the mercy of the insurgents. The South Vietnamese government realized that a new, more effective framework for security in the rural areas was needed.<sup>15</sup>

Ngo Dinh Nhu, the President's brother and principal adviser, favored the introduction of strategic hamlets as a solution to the problem of mounting rural insecurity. In essence, the Strategic Hamlet Program was essentially a modification of the Agrovillage Program, but it reflected a change of focus away from the village to the smaller and sociologically more cohesive unit, the hamlet. There was an increased emphasis on the security aspect, with the construction of elaborate fortifications around the hamlet and an increase in offensive operations to counter Viet Cong activity.<sup>16</sup> The chiefs of several provinces (among them Vinh Long, Quang

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14. For a closer examination on the development of the Self-Defense Corps, see Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group, "Review of Self-Defense Corps," 31 October 1957, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Michigan State University Archives & Historical Collections: Ralph F. Turner Papers, Box 1695, Folder 16, Item Number: 6-20-1607-116-UA17-149\_000099, 31 October 1957. [https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/msu/6-20-1607-116-UA17-149\\_000099.pdf](https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/msu/6-20-1607-116-UA17-149_000099.pdf).

15. For a critique of the strengths and weaknesses of both the Civil Guard and the Self-Defense Corps, see General Coa Van Vien and Lt. Gen. Dong Van Khuyen, *Reflections on the Vietnam War*, CMH Pub 92-8, reprint (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 1984), 16–37. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2770/27700541001.pdf>.

16. Although presented five years later, the efforts outlined in this paper reflect the evolution of US-Government of Vietnam efforts to protect the South Vietnamese population from Viet Cong control. To better



Ngai, and Vinh Binh) had begun constructing fortified hamlets during July and August 1961.<sup>17</sup> Nhu visited a number of these hamlets and was greatly impressed with what he saw. They became the inspiration for the Nhu-directed Strategic Hamlet Program.

The construction of strategic hamlets was not the only plan to be devised and considered as a means of combating insurgency in rural areas. It was inevitable perhaps that Nhu's rival, Ngo Dinh Can, would emerge with a plan of his own. As the leading figure in central Vietnam, Can introduced the Force Populaire in mid-1961.<sup>18</sup> The pilot program was started in Thua Thien Province and focused on training highly motivated teams of political activists. The basic unit of the Force Populaire was a company of approximately 100 men, all indigenous to their area of operations. They would move into a village for a period of up to three months and, in much the same manner as the Communist insurgents, try to establish their influence over the inhabitants of the area.<sup>19</sup>

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understand what took place in the villages, see "Lessons on Countering the Enemy's Present Plans," Sixth Guerrilla Warfare Congress, trans., 1969, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 03, Folder 05, Item Number: 2310305015, 1969. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/231/2310305015.pdf>. See also National Training Center for Revolutionary Development, "How Does Bang Dung Hamlet Defend Itself?" February 15, 1968, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Fred Walker Collection, Box 02, Folder 06, Item Number: 20580206005, 15 February 1968. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2058/20580206005.pdf>.

17. Although ambitious in nature, there were major problems in both the planning and execution of the Strategic Hamlet Program. For an outline of the systemic problems encountered, see "Conclusion: Improvement of The Strategic Hamlet Program," (Draft), n.d., Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Rufus Phillips Collection, Box 01, Folder 33, Item Number: 23970133016, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2397/23970133016.pdf>. For an American perspective of the problems of the Strategic Hamlet Program, see Rufus C. Phillips, "Conversation with President Diem on 19 July 1963," Memorandum for the Record, July 25, 1963, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Rufus Phillips Collection, Box 02, Folder 01, Item Number: 23970201048, 25 July 1963. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2397/23970201048.pdf>. See also "Strategic Hamlet," Vietnam Counterinsurgency—The Diem Era 1959, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 01—Assessment and Strategy, Box 01, Folder 01, Item Number: 2120101001, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/212/2120101001.pdf>.

18. For a better understanding of the competition for resources between the Strategic Hamlet Program and the Force Populaire and the confrontation between the Force Populaire and the Government of Vietnam, see Ahern, Jr., *Vietnam Declassified*, 87–89.

19. Ahern, Jr., *Vietnam Declassified*, 87–89.

During 1961, the Force Populaire concept vied with the Strategic Hamlet Program for priority in the country's pacification effort. Ngo Dinh Nhu was able to take advantage of his role as Diem's principal adviser to promote the latter program. For example, it was largely through his initiative that the Government of Vietnam asked the Malayan Government to loan a group of counterinsurgency experts, the British Advisory Mission (BRIAM). BRIAM was dispatched to South Vietnam in September 1961 under the leadership of Sir Robert Thompson, the former Secretary of Defense in Malaya and an expert on, among other things, protected settlements.<sup>20</sup> In his capacity as Diem's adviser, Nhu also called a special meeting of province chiefs at Can Tho in September 1961, at which time he instructed them to begin building strategic hamlets in their provinces.<sup>21</sup>

By the end of 1961, the Strategic Hamlet scheme had acquired the dimensions of a national program, and three events during early 1962 led to its formalization. The first event was the initiation of a publicity campaign on January 3, 1962, President Diem's sixty-first birthday, to popularize and encourage the extension of the Strategic Hamlet Program. Second, a presidential decree that same day established the Interministerial Committee for Strategic

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20. For background on both Sir Robert Thompson and the British Advisory Mission, see Edward E. Rice, "Your Meeting with R. G. K. Thompson, Head of the British Advisory Mission to South Viet-Nam," Letter to Secretary of State, March 28, 1963, Declassified 6/12/03, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive Collection, Box 0002, Folder 0209, Item Number: F038300020209, 28 March 1963. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/F0383/F038300020209.pdf>. For a decidedly different take on how others saw the interaction between the US-Government of Vietnam efforts to combat the Viet Cong, see Richard Sears Lovering, "Sir Robert Thompson's Better War: The British Advisory Mission and the South Vietnamese Strategic Hamlet Program, 1961-1963," Master's Thesis, University of Southern Mississippi, 2017, 17. [https://aquila.usm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1306&context=Master's theses](https://aquila.usm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1306&context=Master's%20theses). In his thesis, Lovering describes how Thompson compared the American emphasis on military solutions to the British experience in the Malayan Emergency, specifically Thompson's comment that "in Malaya, the army supported the civil authorities (such as the police) while in South Vietnam the roles were reversed."

21. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 128-59.

Hamlets, a high-level coordinating and decision-making body.<sup>22</sup> Third and final, the National Assembly Resolution on April 17, 1962, formally established the Strategic Hamlet Program.<sup>23</sup>

This program was not the totality of the pacification effort during this period. There were programs which fell outside the structure of the Strategic Hamlet Program, such as Land Reform, the National Police Plan, the Civilian Irregular Defense Groups (CIDGs), and the Self-Defense Corps. Nevertheless, the Strategic Hamlet Program represented the main thrust of the US-Government of Vietnam pacification initiative for what turned out to be the final phase of the Diem regime.

### **General Concept**

As part of his publicity campaign to popularize the Strategic Hamlet Program, Ngo Dinh Nhu toured the provinces in early 1962 and held meetings with government officials. In explaining the theory and implementation of the program, Nhu stressed that the fundamental aim behind the establishment of strategic hamlets was the isolation of the insurgents, both physically and politically, from the rural population. Within this fundamental aim, there were three objectives.<sup>24</sup>

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22. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 128–59.

23. “197. Research Memorandum from the Deputy Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Denny) to the Acting Secretary of State,” Washington, July 1, 1963 in *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, Vol. III, Vietnam, January-August 1963, 1963. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v03/d197>.

24. “197. Research Memorandum from the Deputy Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (Denny) to the Acting Secretary of State.”

The first of these objectives, a prerequisite for the other two, was the protection of the people. This was not simply a matter of regrouping some outlying huts in the center of the hamlet and then building a rampart around it of barbed wire, sharpened bamboo stakes, moats, and booby traps—the sort of defense measure



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Figure 18. Vietnamese children standing next to a defense of long, sharpened wood pikes.

which was prominent in many hamlets.<sup>25</sup> It also required a good radio network between hamlets, villages, and the district capitals, as well as training and arming the men from the hamlets as a militia to provide a close-in defense. Until this kind of security arrangement was completed, the defense of the hamlets would be provided by the paramilitary forces (Self-Defense Corps and Civil Guard), while the regular army would hold the perimeter to prevent attacks by major enemy units. Both the paramilitary forces and the regular military were to be deployed to rescue hamlets attacked by more than local guerrilla squads. Another vital aspect of population



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Figure 19. 768th Regional Forces Company manning the perimeter.

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25. George C. Denny, “Strategic Hamlets,” Research Memorandum RFE-58 to Acting Secretary of State, July 1, 1963, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 06—Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Box 15, Folder 18, Item Number: 2321518004, 01 July 1963. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/232/2321518004.pdf>. For the actual instructions issued from Saigon to counter the Viet Cong, see “From Strategic Hamlets to Self Defense Village,” Speech given for the Strategic Hamlet Program at the Saigon Training Center Civic Action Cadres, trans., n.d., Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Vladimir Lehovich Collection. Texas, Box 02, Folder 05, Item Number: 12050205002, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports /images.php?img=/images/1205/12050205002.pdf>.

protection was the elimination of the insurgent infrastructure within the hamlets. No hamlet would be secure against penetration and treachery, nor could the people be expected to take positive action on behalf of the government until the insurgent infrastructure had been eliminated. To ensure a loyal hamlet population, each person would be documented, photographed, and records checked.<sup>26</sup>

The second objective of the Strategic Hamlet Program was to unite the people and involve them in positive action on the side of the government. As a rule, most of the Vietnamese peasants would have been content to live quietly in their hamlets pursuing their traditional occupations as farmers and ignoring the rest of the world. Indeed, they were left largely to themselves in the first few years of the Diem regime, thus leaving a vacuum for the insurgents to move and take over. The aim of the government was to substitute its own controlling influence in the hamlets by promoting not only local community spirit but also a sense of national solidarity. The key to this part of the program involved a restructuring of the political and social organization of the hamlet.<sup>27</sup>

The third objective of the program was to boost development in the economic and social fields. The government realized that any improvement in the welfare of the rural population would seriously handicap the insurgency and its appeal in the countryside. To a large extent, this part of the program was to provide the tangible benefits and rewards of cooperating with the government. It involved building schools, clinics, and markets; improved agricultural methods, water supplies, and electricity; radio programs, newspapers, and so on. It was at this point of the program that the forced regrouping of houses and other hardships associated with the strategic

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26. Denny, "Strategic Hamlets," and "From Strategic Hamlets to Self Defense Village."

27. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 128–59.

hamlets would be offset by compensating advantages.<sup>28</sup> Although the peasants may have farther to go to work in their fields, they would have greater access to many amenities of life: schools for the children and markets for the wife.

Because of this laissez-faire attitude, the hamlet's social and economic welfare requirements were given a low priority in the government's order of business. It is interesting to note, for instance, that the official six criteria for a completed strategic hamlet, listed on July 19, 1962, made no reference to economic betterment. A hamlet was completed when the people had: (1) cleared Communists from the area and coordinated population-control measures with the police and hamlet chief; (2) coordinated control of people and resources with the Vietnamese Information Service, indoctrinated the population, and successfully organized all the people; (3) instructed and divided work of all the people as to their obligations when disaster strikes; (4) completed defenses—such as fences, spikes, communication trenches, hidden trenches in all houses; (5) organized two special forces cells in each strategic hamlet; and (6) held the election of an advisory council.<sup>29</sup>

### **Organizational Concept**

In its early stages, the Strategic Hamlet Program was administered through the preexisting channels of government. There was no single executive body responsible for the overall direction and coordination of the program unless one viewed Nhu's active promotion of the strategic hamlets in such a light.<sup>30</sup> Disregarding bureaucratic niceties, Nhu chose to communicate directly with the province chiefs, upon whose shoulders rested the main responsibility for implementing the program. Many of the province chiefs were army officers,

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28. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 128–59.

29. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 128–59.

30. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 128–59.

and they were expected to act in both a civilian and military capacity.<sup>31</sup> They were thus in an ideal position to coordinate the different aspects of the Strategic Hamlet Program. A problem was created, however, by the fact that the province chief in his civilian capacity was subordinate to the Ministry of Interior, while as a military officer he looked to the South Vietnamese army high command for support, if not instructions.<sup>32</sup> Due to the byzantine nature of interlocking family connections, military cliques, and political attention coming from the presidential palace, it was not always possible to reconcile this division of loyalty and responsibility, and the result often was confusion and internal conflict. An additional handicap for the province chief was his lack of administrative control over the local representatives of other ministries, such as education, civic action, and rural development.

By the end of 1961, it was clear that the Strategic Hamlet Program required administrative revamping, especially as it was then assuming the proportions of a major crusade. A great deal of the discussion in Diem's Internal Security Council meetings was directed at this problem. The result was the presidential decree on February 3, 1962, which established the Interministerial Committee for Strategic Hamlets.<sup>33</sup> The committee was composed of the heads of the Ministries of Interior, Defense, Education, Civic Action, and Rural Affairs, and the Chief of the General Staff of the Vietnamese Armed Forces. The Minister of Interior became the secretary-general, but no chairman was named since Ngo Dinh Nhu exercised this authority in practice and did not want his position formalized. The new committee was instructed to prepare an overall plan for establishing strategic hamlets throughout the country, i.e., to determine, in order of priority, the various areas where strategic hamlets were to be constructed and the techniques and time period of construction; to estimate the requirements for, and distribute,

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31. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 128–59.

32. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 128–59.

33. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 673–81.

material and human resources among the provinces; to specify responsibilities and coordinate the activities of regional and provincial organizations; and to supervise and control the general strategic hamlet construction program.<sup>34</sup>

The line of responsibility for the Strategic Hamlet Program passed from the Interministerial Committee to the regions, province, and finally to the districts. At the regional level, there were regional committees for strategic hamlets, headed by the regional tactical commanders. The responsibility of the regional committees was predominantly military, simply because the region functioned as a step in the military chain of command, but not so in the hierarchy of the civilian administration. The Strategic Hamlet Program, nevertheless, utilized the regions for one important civilian operation: It established regional inspection teams whose function was to determine what progress was being made on the strategic hamlets in their areas and to report their findings to the Interministerial Committee in Saigon.<sup>35</sup>

There were provincial committees for strategic hamlets, headed by the province chiefs and composed of other provincial and district officials. The provincial committee was primarily responsible for carrying out the directives of the Interministerial Committee and for developing plans for the individual provinces. The planning and execution of the Strategic Hamlet Program were most important, however, at the district level. It was the chief of the district who was directly responsible for the realization of the program in his small area. He and the military officers of the local command would meet with the province chief and the provincial committee for strategic hamlets to discuss plans for the construction of strategic hamlets in the district. After final plans were approved, the resources of the Civil Guard, Self-Defense Corps, the police and

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34. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 673–81.

35. Unfortunately, by the end of 1963, the demise of the program was visible—empty hamlets lined country roads, stripped of valuable metal by the Viet Cong and the fleeing peasants. Neil Sheehan “The rows of roofless houses looked like villages of play huts that children had erected and then whimsically abandoned,” cited in *Bright Shining Lie*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 365.



security services, and the relevant ministries were mobilized, at least in theory, for the accomplishment of the goals associated with the program.<sup>36</sup>

The civilian and military participants in the program were usually organized into groups called strategic hamlet construction teams.<sup>37</sup> Each team was assigned a hamlet by the district chief (he himself would generally serve as the leader of a team), and orientation sessions were held to establish a clear understanding of the problems and to review measures and methods to be employed.

Nhu eventually overcame his reluctance to be associated formally with the Interministerial Committee, and he assumed chairmanship in the spring of 1962.<sup>38</sup> Despite the elaborate structure outlined above, Nhu tended to ignore the Interministerial Committee and the regional committees and issued orders directly to the province chiefs. To the extent that he did consult the Interministerial Committee, he completely dominated the meetings. American observers in the field reported that while Diem ordered that construction of Strategic Hamlets, the results were far from ideal. “Although the Vietnamese Government is giving the strategic village-hamlet program high priority, there is reliable evidence that the program suffers seriously from inadequate direction, coordination, and material assistance by the central government and from misunderstanding among officials at the provincial and local levels. Province chiefs have tended to draw up unrealistically high quotas (generally to please the authorities in Saigon), and the lack of enough resources provided by the government at the local level has in certain instances resulted in poorly constructed and poorly defended settlements and in financial levies on the peasant. Moreover, the construction of these settlements has not followed any pattern or

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36. *Bright Shining Lie*, 365. See also *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 673–81.

37. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 128–59.

38. Glenn W. LaFantasie, ed., “209. Telegram from Embassy in Vietnam to the Department of State,” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1961–1963*, Vol. II, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1962). <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v02/d209>.

plan based on priorities. In his reported recent merger of the ‘Delta’ plan and the strategic village-hamlet program, however,<sup>39</sup>

### **The American Interagency Committee for Province Rehabilitation**

Realizing that Diem’s government was making a major push to secure the countryside, the Interagency Committee for Province Rehabilitation (COPROR), was formed with the US mission in late March 1962 as a counterpart to the Interministerial Committee for Strategic Hamlets. COPROR



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Figure 20. Kontum district advisory staff.

was chaired by the deputy chief of mission.<sup>40</sup> Representatives of all US agencies—MACV, USOM, the United States Information Service, and the CIA were involved and, theoretically, problems of coordination, as well as liaison with the Vietnamese government, were dealt with in this group. The COPROR had no secretariat, and coordination often was achieved through informal interagency contacts.<sup>41</sup>

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39. President Diem has indicated that priorities would be established,” cited in *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 673–81.

40. For those wishing to learn more on COPROR, see “USOM-aided Counter-Insurgency Program,” Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Vincent Puritano Collection, Box 01, Folder 16, Item Number: 21470116011, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2147/21470116011.pdf>. See also “Committee on Province Rehabilitation: Terms Of Reference,” Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Rufus Phillips Collection, Box 01, Folder 30, Item Number: 23970130022, 06 April 1962. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2397/23970130022.pdf>; and “Memorandum From The Assistant Director For Rural Affairs, United States Operations Mission in Vietnam (Phillips) to The Director of The Mission (Brent), “ in *Foreign Relations, 1961-1963*, Vol. III, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Rufus Phillips Collection, Box 01, Folder 29, Item Number: 23970129004, May 1, 1963. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2397/23970129004.pdf>.

41. “Committee on Province Rehabilitation: Terms Of Reference,” Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Rufus Phillips Collection, Box 01, Folder 30, Item Number: 23970130022, April 6, 1962. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2397/23970130022.pdf>. For an outline of responsibilities within the Committee on Province Rehabilitation, see “USOM-aided Counter-Insurgency Program Report,” Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Vincent Puritano Collection, Box 01, Folder 16, Item Number: 21470116011, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2147/21470116011.pdf>.

In May 1962, a two-man USAID team (Rufus Phillips and Albert Fraleigh) was sent to Saigon<sup>42</sup> to survey the situation and prepare recommendations for increased USAID support. Phillips and Fraleigh recommended that a special office for rural affairs, or counterinsurgency, be established within the USAID mission as the action unit to administer a decentralized program to support the Government of Vietnam Strategic Hamlet Program. According to the plan, a USOM representative would be assigned to each of the provinces to administer a greatly increased military assistance program. Thus, it was through the Strategic Hamlet Program that the United States became involved in an advisory capacity at the provincial level.<sup>43</sup>

Phillips and Fraleigh estimated approximately \$10 million in local currency would be required to get the Strategic Hamlet Program moving. The money would be used to defray costs incurred by rural families in moving from insecure areas into the fortified hamlets; to support the recruiting,



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Figure 21. American advisor and Vietnam navy personnel.

training, and deployment of government personnel who would work in the countryside; to support the training of local militia and hamlet officials; to subsidize self-help projects; and to support psychological warfare and information activities.<sup>44</sup> The team also recommended that “Food for Peace” (Public Law 430, Title II) commodities and US excess property items be

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42. For those wishing to know more of the background of the Rufus Phillips and Albert Fraleigh mission, see Samuel Hale Butterfield, “Achievement and Failures in The Twentieth Century,” in *U.S. Development Aid-An Historic First* (Westport, CT: Praeger, n.d.), Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Rufus Phillips Collection, Box 01, Folder 31, Item Number: 23970131040, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2397/23970131040.pdf>.

43. Samuel Hale Butterfield, “Achievement and Failures in the Twentieth Century.”

44. Butterfield, *Achievement and Failures in the Twentieth Century*.

imported for use in the pacification effort. These recommendations were accepted in Washington, and Phillips was selected to head the Office of Rural Affairs, with Fraleigh as his deputy. The recruitment of provincial representatives was initiated by USAID in Washington.<sup>45</sup> In Saigon, the newly created Office of Rural Affairs started working with the Government of Vietnam to develop a set of specific administrative procedures to implement the Strategic Hamlet Program. As a first step, Saigon instructed the province chiefs to prepare comprehensive provincial rehabilitation plans and detailed estimates of the funds, materials, and personnel required to carry out the plans. When correlated, these plans were reviewed briefly by the Interministerial Committee, the Office of Rural Affairs, and the MAAG's Strategic Hamlets Division. A joint US-Government of Vietnam team composed of the directors of these three organizations made a field trip to the provinces to work out problems, prepare a budget for USOM financial and material support, and calculate Military Assistance Program (MAP) materials required, which would be supplied through the MAAG. The plans and budgets were then submitted to the US Interagency Committee and the Government of Vietnam Interministerial Committee for official approval.<sup>46</sup>

To facilitate additional coordination and to increase accountability, a Provincial Rehabilitation Committee was created, with the province chief as chairman and the US provincial representative and US military sector adviser as members. This committee approved specific projects, established priorities in connection with the provincial rehabilitation plan, and was responsible for the successful implementation of the plan. Though the province chief was

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45. For information on the Food for Peace Program, see Agency for International Development, "Economic Assistance to Vietnam," Fact Sheet, Texas Tech University, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 11—Monograph, Box 01, Folder 13, Item Number: 2390113003, May 1966. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/239/2390113003.pdf>.

46. For a long and elaborate outline stating reporting procedures and lines of financial support and responsibility, see "USOM-aided Counter-Insurgency Program Report."

the executive and made the decisions in the final analysis, the US provincial representative had to countersign all expenditures involving US funds. In this manner, a substantial degree of US supervision was maintained over the pacification effort in the countryside.<sup>47</sup>

### **Supervision of the Strategic Hamlets in the Countryside**

Although the hamlet was the basic unit of Vietnamese society, it had not acquired an important role in the country's administrative structure. The lowest rung on the government's administrative ladder was the village. Thus, an important part of the Strategic Hamlet Program was the extension of the government network down to the hamlets. Three categories of elected officials were to make up the hamlet administrative organization. At the top of the pyramid was the hamlet chief. Instead of being solely in charge of hamlet administration, as was formerly the case, the hamlet chief was to have three assistants, forming a four-man Hamlet Administrative Committee. Their responsibilities were divided generally along the following three lines: first, security and youth affairs (including fortifications, defense, and youth organizations); second, political matters (including information and civic action); third, economic and social problems (land, agricultural and technical advice).<sup>48</sup> A Hamlet Council, consisting of five to fifteen advisory members represented the different age groups and various local organizations.<sup>49</sup>

Finally, were "interfamily" group leaders. Each small cluster of households was to elect a leader whose function was to assure an effective link between the Administrative Committee and the individual members of the hamlet. One of the duties of the group leader, for example, was to

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47. "USOM-aided Counter-Insurgency Program Report." See also Tran Dinh Tho. *Pacification*, 203–14.

48. Tho, *Pacification*, 203–14.

49. Tho, *Pacification*, 203–14. See also John D. Donoghue, *My Thuan: A Delta Village in South Vietnam* (Ann Arbor, MI: Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group, 1963. Texas Tech University. Vietnam Center and Archive. Michigan State University Vietnam Advisory Group Collection. Box 01, Folder 17. Item Number: 1490117001. 1963. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/149/1490117001a.pdf>.

transmit work assignments from the Administrative Committee to the populace.<sup>50</sup> To help establish strategic hamlets, each province organized and trained strategic hamlet construction teams—called civic action teams or rural rehabilitation teams. These teams, comprised from ten to twenty cadres drawn from civilian and military services in the provinces. The teams worked directly under the supervision of the district chief and the district committee for strategic hamlets, which included the Civil Guard company commander and district representatives of the Government of Vietnam ministries and departments.<sup>51</sup> The construction teams had two major functions: to assist the hamlet in organizing itself administratively and socially and to set up hamlet defenses. It was the intention of the Government of Vietnam to utilize the existing hamlet structure as much as possible rather than rely on relocating the population to new hamlets.<sup>52</sup>

### **Village Organization and Security**

After a census was taken, the inhabitants were divided into interfamily groups, sometimes referred to as the combined-family mutual assistance system. Each of these groups contained approximately five families, the members of which elected a group leader. These groups were assigned the construction of a portion of the hamlet's defense, generally in front of their own homes. The work to be done was divided among the various families at the discretion of their elected leader. Once this effort was underway, the people were organized into age and sex groups. There was, for example, a male elders' group, a female elders' group, a senior group

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50. F. David James, "Pacification Through People," CORDS Memorandum, Vietnam, 9 October 1968, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Gary Larsen Collection, Box 02, Folder 10, Item Number: 19600210023, 9 October 1968. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/1960/19600210023.pdf>.

51. Captain Robert D. Schneider, "Lessons Learned in the Province Rehabilitation Program," IV Corps, Army Advisory Group Memorandum, San Francisco, 14 September 1963, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Vladimir Lehovich Collection, Box 02, Folder 03, Item Number: 12050203010, 14 September 1963. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/1205/12050203010.pdf>. See also William A. Nighswonger, *Rural Pacification in Vietnam: 1962-1965* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, May 1966), 87–89. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/587132](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/587132).

52. Nighswonger, *Rural Pacification in Vietnam*, 80.

(men 18 to 35 years old), a woman's group (18 to 25 years old), a male junior team, and a female junior team. Each of these groups also had an elected leader and each group was assigned various tasks in defense of the hamlet (e.g., the women looked after the children in case of attack); the young men were assigned the most important job—serving as the hamlet militia. The members of the hamlet were also encouraged to join local political organizations such as the National Revolutionary Movement, the Women's Solidarity Movement, and the Republican Youth Movement. The purpose of these social and political organizations, naturally, was to provide the government with a means of organizing and influencing the members of the hamlet and, thereby, turning them into a weapon to be used against the insurgency.<sup>53</sup>

The core of the hamlet militia was formed by the Republican Youth Movement, the hamlet unit was among the first groups to be organized by the visiting cadres. Although, theoretically, the age range in the Republican Youth was 18 to 35, in practice the upper age limit was often as high as 45 or 50 years.<sup>54</sup> In many cases, local self-governing councils were created or reactivated. The most important was the Council of Elders, generally found only at the village level, which might have from 20 to 200 members, including women.<sup>55</sup> Other such councils were found in both the villages and the hamlets, usually comprised the wealthy and influential men and women living there, including some influential younger men who had authority to consult with and influence the village and hamlet councils. Thus, it provided an added measure of response to local needs and maintained a link with Vietnamese traditional institutions.<sup>56</sup> Once the

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53. Donoghue, *My Thuan*, 32–35.

54. Donoghue, *My Thuan*, 32–35.

55. For a history of the Council of Elders, see “The Viet Village: Resistance Against Meddling by Foreign Powers,” Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 06—Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Box 18, Folder 44, Item Number: 2321844002, October 1985. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/232/2321844002.pdf>.

56. “Self-Reliance,” UN Bulletin, 1 July 1971, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 02—Military Operations, Box 18, Folder 06, Item Number: 2131806129, 1 July 1971. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/213/2131806129.pdf>.

elections were held (or appointments made) and the strategic hamlets established to specifications, most provinces and districts attempted to carry out economic and social development activities within the hamlets. A few schools were built and dispensaries with medical kits established, but there were limited resources and the general attitude of the Diem government, and notably, Ngo Dinh Nhu, was opposed to dispensing such assistance to the people.<sup>57</sup>

If a major flaw existed in the Strategic Hamlet Program, it was the excessive weight placed upon self-sufficiency and self-reliance. This is not to imply that these qualities were alien to the rural Vietnamese. Indeed, the people of the villages and hamlets had exercised a great deal of local initiative and independence for a long time. This tradition, however, had always been influenced by the conditions of autonomy and self-interest. It was either overlooked or ignored by Ngo Dinh Nhu in his effort to impose a new arrangement and new responsibilities on the people. There was in his approach and outlook an insistence that it was the duty of the peasants to shoulder the burden of implementing the Strategic Hamlet Program. But there were many disharmonies between the program's goals and the needs and requirements of the rural population. Also, there was far too little emphasis and follow through on the responsibilities of the Vietnamese government itself in this same regard.<sup>58</sup>

It is possible that Nhu emphasized the role of the hamlet and its inhabitants because he recognized the serious shortcomings of his own government. If this were the case, his concern about the performance of the Government of Vietnam was borne out in 1962 and 1963. One of the outstanding flaws in the implementation of the Strategic Hamlet Program was the persistent lack of sensitivity toward the rural people, their feelings, and real needs. In addition, there was

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57. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 128–59.

58. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 128–59.



considerable disagreement with the US military who objected to the proposed focus of the program on the most populated areas of South Vietnam; the US wished to focus on areas where Communist influence was greatest.<sup>59</sup>

### **Flawed Implementation**

Securing the village population from Viet Cong coercion was both worthwhile and necessary, if Saigon was to have any chance to win the cooperation of their own citizens. Whatever good intentions motivated the endeavor were destroyed through often brutal implementation. Roger Hilsman, in his capacity as Director of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research [INR] at the Department of State, claimed that the Government of Vietnam's execution of program constituted a “total misunderstanding of what the [Strategic Hamlet] program should try to do.”<sup>60</sup>

Diem and Nhu were impatient to expand the program, but it was their treatment of the people that caused its eventual failure. A review of the *Pentagon Papers* shows that in September 1962, 4.3 million people were housed in 3,225 completed hamlets with more than two thousand still under construction.<sup>61</sup> Those numbers doubled by July 1963, to over eight and a half million people had been settled in 7,205 hamlets.<sup>62</sup> At this breakneck rate of construction,

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59. Krepinevich, *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, March 1988), 67.

60. Roger Hilsman, *To Move a Nation* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1967), 427–38; and *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 1, 1–52. For an example of why Hilsman thought that the GVN was on the wrong track, see John C. Donnell and Gerald C. Hickey. *The Vietnamese Strategic Hamlets: A Preliminary Report*, The RAND Corporation (Santa Monica, California: September, 1962). Roger Hilsman, correspondence with author, November 26, 1994, states that “instead of an oil blot approach developing over 20 or 30 years, Nhu put one of the first hamlets on the Cambodian border, where it was soon overrun with a great loss of life . . . we did everything we could to get him to adopt the ‘oil blot’ approach, to no avail,” recounted in A Fragmented Effort: Ngo Dinh Diem, The United States Military And State Department And The Strategic Hamlet Program of 1961-1963,” December 10, 1994, footnote # 48,16, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 06—Democratic Republic of Vietnam, Box 15, Folder 15, Item Number: 2321515001, December 10, 1994. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/232/2321515001.pdf>.

61. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 128–59.

62. Milton E. Osborne, “Strategic Hamlets in South Vietnam: A Survey and Comparison,” Data Paper No. 55 (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, Southeast Asian Program, Department of Asian Studies, 1965), 33.

the Government of Vietnam was unable to fully support or protect the hamlets or its residents, despite funding by the United States government. Viet Cong insurgents easily sabotaged and overran the poorly defended communities, gaining access to the South Vietnamese peasants. By the end of 1963, only twenty percent of the hamlets in the Mekong Delta area were controlled by the Government of Vietnam.<sup>63</sup> A resident of a hamlet in Vinh-Long described the situation: “It is dangerous in my village because the civil guard from the district headquarters crosses the river to the village only in the daytime . . . leaving the village unprotected at night. The village people have no protection from the Viet Cong, so they will not inform on them to the authorities.”<sup>64</sup>

Another problem facing the Government of Vietnam was trying to do too much with too little. It is an axiomatic truism that only successful farmers eat. To be a successful farmer means that you know what you are doing when it comes to making decisions that will provide for your family—life punishes the foolish. One of the little-discussed features of the failure of the Strategic Hamlet Program was that where the hamlets were constructed had a great deal more to do with politics than where farmers could sustain themselves. To an overwhelming degree, the villagers suffered from an inability to choose safe and agriculturally sound locations for the hamlets.<sup>65</sup> It must be said that the single most important factor in the failure of the Strategic Hamlet Program was the inflexible nature of the ruling Ngo family.<sup>66</sup>

There is one additional factor that came to light only after the fall of the South Vietnamese government in 1975. Colonel Pham Ngoc Thao was placed in charge of the planning and the supervision of the Strategic Hamlet Program. Thao told Nhu it was imperative to build as many hamlets as fast as possible, when told the peasants resented being forcibly removed from

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63. Osborne, “Strategic Hamlets in South Vietnam” 38.

64. Osborne, “Strategic Hamlets in South Vietnam,” 6.

65. Osborne, “Strategic Hamlets in South Vietnam,” 25.

66. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 158.

their ancestral lands and put into forts they themselves had to build.<sup>67</sup> The Ngos were unaware Thao, ostensibly a Catholic, was, in fact, a Communist double agent on a mission to turn the rural populace against Saigon.<sup>68</sup> Thao turned strategic hamlets into Communist strongholds. Thus, increasing the number of Communist sympathizers that moved into the hamlets and were given identification cards. As a result, the Viet Cong were more effectively able to penetrate the villages to access supplies and personnel.<sup>69</sup> Nor were his activities limited to the South Vietnamese. Utilizing the extraordinary placement of their agent, the Communist attempted to assassinate Defense Secretary Robert McNamara. In 1962, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara visited South Vietnam for an inspection tour of the country with President Diem and Thao. No doubt Thao divulged tour details to Viet Cong guerrillas, because each of McNamara's stopovers was punctuated by bloody attacks on nearby ARVN installations. When McNamara was in Binh Duong Province, five government soldiers were killed. As he flew from Da Lat north to Da Nang near the Demilitarized Zone, the Viet Cong bombed a southbound troop train, killing 27 and wounding 30 Civil Guard members.<sup>70</sup>

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67. An extremely interesting man and an incredible double agent strictly placed to do the ultimate damage to the South Vietnamese cause, Thao's life is the stuff of legend. To gain a better understanding of the complex relationship that existed within the Catholic community and the divided loyalties that existed within the South Vietnamese military, see Karnow, *Vietnam*: 274.

68. For more information on Pham Ngoc Thao, see Truong Nhu Tang, et. al., *A Vietcong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and its Aftermath* (New York: Vintage Publishing, 1986), 42-62.

69. Jacobs, *Cold War Mandarin*, 127; and, A. J. "Jack" Langguth, *Our Vietnam: The War 1954-1975* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 168-69.

70. Langguth, *Our Vietnam*, 175.

## Operations Sunrise and Sea Swallow

Bernard Fall's book, *The Two Viet-nams: A Political and Military Analysis*, describes many details of "Operation Sunrise." Fall points out that Binh Duong Province, north of Saigon, was chosen as the test site because of the insurgents' use of Ben Cat district, with its rubber plantations and wild forests, as a redoubt for the 55th and 300th battalions.<sup>71</sup> Saigon authorities viewed Ben Cat, bordering Saigon on the northeast and southwest, as the keystone to the "arc of insurgency." It not only qualified as a worthwhile first target for this reason, but also had the advantage of containing only a relatively small amount of 38,000 people.<sup>72</sup>

Operation Sunrise began with a military maneuver aimed at sweeping the guerrilla forces out of Ben Cat's populated area.<sup>73</sup> People who remained in the hamlets were rounded up by the security forces. Seventy families agreed to move voluntarily; 140 others, according to Time magazine, "had to be convinced at gunpoint."<sup>74</sup> Foreign observers also noted that most of the able-bodied men had abandoned the area before the security forces arrived.<sup>75</sup> The Ben Tuong hamlet area, to which the peasants were moved, consisted mainly of cleared ground, except for a concrete infirmary and administrative building. The people had to construct their own thatched huts and moats and walls for defense. In the following weeks, a school was built; the land was cleared for cultivation; and fertilizer, tools, and seed were distributed to begin farming. Government of Vietnam forces then conducted indoctrination and psychological activities using leaflets, radio broadcasts, and occasional movies and plays. Local security was provided by one Civil Guard company, and a Republican Youth group was trained as a hamlet militia. To complete the security system for the hamlet, a US-supplied radio for hamlet-to-district

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71. Bernard Fall, *The Two Viet-nams*, 37.

72. Fall, *The Two Viet-nams*, 378.

73. Fall, *The Two Viet-nams*, 378.

74. Fall, *The Two Viet-nams*, 378.

75. Fall, *The Two Viet-nams*, 378.

communication was installed. Other American assistance for the overall operation included military aid and coordination provided by MAAG and an initial sum of \$300,000 from USOM to help compensate resettled families for property lost and damaged while moving. To ensure that the peasants did not attempt to leave the hamlet and return to their old villages, their old dwellings were burned and leveled.<sup>76</sup>

Operation Sunshine in many ways was a template for future resettlement programs. Methods used reflected the desire on the part of those in Saigon to not only deny Viet Cong support, but to control the population to gain acceptance for the Government of Vietnam. As outlined, the United States Agency for International Development provided \$21 per family to compensate farmers for their loss of property when forced to move into a strategic hamlet. Of the first 210 families relocated, 140 were reported to have been moved at gunpoint. Once the villagers were moved, the South Vietnamese soldiers burned their former villages to keep them from returning. By May, South Vietnam's government-owned newspaper reported that only seven percent of 38,000 rural dwellers in the target area had been relocated either voluntarily or by force.<sup>77</sup>

The establishment of Ben Tuong was hailed as an enormous success and the Government of Vietnam proceeded to extend the program into other areas of Bing Duong Province. The Ben Tuong operation was followed by Ben Dong Soon on July 17, 1962. In the remaining southeast provinces covered by Operation Sunrise, strategic hamlets were constructed in Binh Duong Province without the elaborate military clear-and-hold operations necessitated by the high degree of insecurity.

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76. Fall, *The Two Viet-nams*, 378. For an on-the-spot recount of what took place at Ben Cat, see "Tactic in Viet-Nam," *New York Times* (International Edition), April 2, 1962, cited in Fall, *The Two Viet-nams*, footnote on 489.

77. For more information, see Andrew F Krepinevich, Jr. *The Army and Vietnam*, 67–68; and Michael L. Latham, "Redirecting the Revolution? The USA and the Failure of Nation Building in South Vietnam," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 27, No. 2, (2006): 35.

By mid-1962, there was considerable controversy among Vietnamese, American, and British planners in Saigon over the progress of Operation Sunrise. Many observers, including some Vietnamese, believed that both the small sum of money given to the people to convince them to move coupled with the measures employed to move them to the new hamlets were bitterly resented. The regulations controlling the movement of the people gave the strategic hamlets the appearance of a detention area rather than that of a community. Bernard Fall's stated in *The Two Viet-nams* that:

Certain journalists—particularly American journalists—have made it appear, either through wickedness or naiveté that “Operation Sunrise” consists in applying totalitarian methods in order to compel people to leave their villages. . . . It is easily conceivable that the uprooting of peasant families, and particularly the destruction of abandoned villages, is not always accepted with joy, in spite of the explanations given by the government. Nevertheless, “Operation Sunrise” is not a pacification plan similar to that which has been applied in Algeria. The war which we fight against Communism is the opposite of a colonial war . . . [it] is a salvaging operation, not affecting the principles of democracy, and a humanitarian action which the government of a free country undertakes because it is afflicted by Communism.<sup>78</sup>

In terms of statistical accomplishment, *Tu Do*, a Saigon newspaper controlled by the Government of Vietnam, reported on May 13, 1962 that of the 38,000 inhabitants of Ben Cat district, sixty percent must be reckoned as “communist intoxicated,” and that after six weeks of operations, only 2,769 inhabitants (seven percent) had moved voluntarily or by force into Ben

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78. Fall, *The Two Viet-nams*, 380.

Tuong and the smaller hamlets of Ben Dong So and Bau Bang.<sup>79</sup> Obviously, the operation had not yet succeeded in depriving the insurgents of civilian support in the area. This fact was borne out when a guerrilla force ambushed an ARVN convoy in broad daylight in June 1962 near Ben Cat, killing 26 South Vietnamese soldiers, several civilian public works technicians, and two American military officers. The success of the ambush was in large part because the civilian population failed to notify the local ARVN posts of the impending attack.<sup>80</sup> One year later, the situation had not changed. Some strategic hamlets withstood guerrilla attacks while others were overwhelmed, or even betrayed. Among the casualties was Ben Tuong, the pilot strategic hamlet, which was overrun and destroyed by the enemy on August 20, 1963.<sup>81</sup>

### Operation Sea Swallow

The enemy's interference with communications up and down the coast and the ever-present threat that a concentrated insurgent drive might cut the country in two led to the launch of a second major operation under the Strategic Hamlet Program in Phu Yen. With Operation Sunrise well underway,



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Operation Sea Swallow was launched on May 6, 1962 in Phu Yen Province in central Vietnam. Phu Yen extends from the Annamite Chain watershed to the coast; its population of 356,000 was under the almost undisputed control of the

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79. Fall, *The Two Viet-nams*, 380.

80. Fall, *The Two Viet-nams*, 380. Given what is now known about the Viet Cong double agent, Truong Nhu Tang, who deliberately placed hamlets in Viet Cong-controlled areas to better facilitate infiltration, the villagers might be forgiven for not notifying Government of Vietnam forces of impending attacks. The villagers may have had the Viet Cong as literal neighbors.

81. Fall, *The Two Viet-nams*, 382.

Viet Cong. One of the few areas where the government retained control was in and around Tuy Hoa, the provincial capital.

Although basically similar in broad conception to Operation Sunrise, the campaign in Phu Yen was different in several respects. It embraced the idea of strategic hamlets, but it also set out consciously to give the inhabitants an interest and stake in their own well-being and in the conduct of their own affairs. The United States was largely responsible for this emphasis on winning the support of the people in rural areas: large sums of US aid were made available for resettlement, medical aid, and security operations. Whereas Operation Sunrise had begun with considerable harshness, the officers responsible for field control in Operation Sea Swallow insisted that the people not be moved until houses were ready for them, and, moreover, that they are compensated for their destroyed homes.<sup>82</sup> Operation Sea Swallow was to be the pilot scheme for a series of clear-and-hold operations in the central coastal region of the country. The idea was to move from the narrow coastal plain by a series of three bounds along the valleys and high into the foothills of the Annamite Chain.<sup>83</sup>

In the first phase (90 days), strategic hamlets were to be built in the relatively secure areas around Tuy Hoa. The next step was to push out into the more heavily dominated-enemy areas and establish strategic hamlets in which the population would be given direct military protection by the ARVN and Civil Guard.<sup>84</sup> This phase was to take sixty days. In the final phase (150 days) the security forces would take on the insurgents in their own areas, pushing deeper and deeper into the mountains and perhaps threatening even the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

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82. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 673–81.

83. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 673–81.

84. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 673–81.



## **Additional Pacification Programs**

*Chieu Hoi Program.* In April 1963, the Diem regime launched the Chieu Hoi (Open Arms) campaign to encourage enemy defections to the government side. The campaign, patterned after successful experiments conducted in Malaya and the Philippines, was designed to attract and rehabilitate disillusioned Viet Cong willing to defect. Each strategic hamlet established its own Chieu Hoi committee to welcome those Viet Cong who wanted to return and serve the national cause. At the central level, the defectors' program was supervised and run by a subcommittee attached to the Interministerial Committee for Strategic Hamlets. A presidential proclamation and various instructions for Chieu Hoi cadres were printed on small leaflets that were distributed throughout the country. The leaflets also served as safe-conduct passes for defecting Viet Cong.<sup>85</sup>

*Land Reform.* In its early years, the Diem government considered agrarian reform one of its great successes. By the beginning of the 1960s, however, it was apparent that the program had fallen far short. Six years after the land reform ordinance was promulgated on October 22, 1956, less than one-third of the eligible peasants had benefited from it and the Government of Vietnam still had 150,000 hectares of land to distribute. To begin with, the reform was altogether too conservative; landowners were permitted to retain as much as 100 hectares of rice land and

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85. Jeannine S. Swift, "Chieu Hoi: A US Pacification Program in Vietnam Revisited, 1963-1972," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Ogden Williams Collection, Box 01, Folder 03, Item Number: 15250103001 July 1968. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/320340](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/320340). For a look at the Viet Cong response to disrupt the Chieu Hoi program, see "VC Efforts to Disrupt the Chieu Hoi Program," Strategic Research and Analysis Paper, SRAP2069, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 05—National Liberation Front, Box 15, Folder 16, Item Number: 2311516030, 22 December 1969. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/231/2311516030.pdf>. For Washington's thoughts on the Chieu Hoi program, see Chester L. Cooper, "Chieu Hoi," White House Memorandum, August 4, 1965, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Larry Berman Collection (Presidential Archives Research), Box 02, Folder 20, Item Number: 0240220023, 4 August 1965. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/024/0240220023.pdf>.

another 15 hectares for burial grounds and ancestor worship.<sup>86</sup> In addition, the program lacked regulatory machinery to adjudicate tenant and landlord conflicts, and all sorts of arrangements were devised by landlords to defeat the intent of the program. In areas where lack of security had prevented the landlords from collecting rents on their properties for many years, the peasants regarded Diem's land reform as a step backward. Pressure was placed upon them to pay rents retroactively. In addition, they faced the payment of high prices for the land they had once all but regarded as their own. In effect, the Land Reform Program, to the extent that it even operated in the early 1960s, generated more antagonism than support for the Government of Vietnam.<sup>87</sup>

***The Civilian Irregular Defense Groups.*** CIDGs were an outgrowth of the US military's pacification effort in the central Vietnam mountainous regions. Beginning with the Rhade tribe around Ban Me Thuot in Darlac Province in early 1961, US Army Special Forces teams assigned to the CIA joined Vietnamese Special Forces counterparts in training and equipping young men from Rhade villages. The American and Vietnamese team members lived and ate with the tribesmen during the training period. While many of the Americans developed close relations with the tribesmen, the Vietnamese tended to remain more aloof and distant. The Vietnamese traditionally have held the highlanders in low regard and were reluctant to see them armed. After

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86. J. Price Gittinger, "Progress in South Vietnam's Agrarian Reform," (I) *Far Eastern Survey* (January 1960); and J. Price Gittinger, "Progress in South Vietnam's Agrarian Reform," (II) *Far Eastern Survey* (February 1960), Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 11—Monographs, Box 02, Folder 12, Item Number: 2390212001, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/239/2390212001.pdf>. For a more extensive review of both Land Reform and crop development to include "Miracle Rice," see Tran Quang Minh, "Agricultural Development in Viet Nam" (Saigon: The Vietnam Council on Foreign Relations, n.d.), Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 11—Monographs, Box 01, Folder 01, Item Number: 2390101002, n.d. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/320340](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/320340).

87. To see what was proposed and later attempted when dealing with the issues of Land Occupancy and Rent, see "Joint Policy: PSYOP Support for the Freezing of Land Occupancy and Rent: Land Reform," PSYOP Policy Guidance No. 81, 1969, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Michigan State University Archives & Historical Collections: Wesley R. Fishel Papers, Box 1237, Folder 46, Item Number: 6-20-1A12-116-UA17-95\_001583, 1969 [https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/msu/6-20-1A12-116-UA17-95\\_001583.pdf](https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/msu/6-20-1A12-116-UA17-95_001583.pdf).

six weeks of instruction, the well-armed young men were returned to their homes to defend their hamlets and report movements of the enemy.<sup>88</sup>

By 1963, an extensive number of US teams were at work creating 200-man strike forces for operations in insecure areas. More than 25,000 tribesmen were armed under the CIDG program. In addition to providing security in their areas of operation, the CIDGs undertook comprehensive civic action projects, including medical care, construction projects, and education.<sup>89</sup>

*The Civil Guard and the Self-Defense Corps.* A basic ingredient of the Strategic Hamlet Program was the provision of security through a combination of the forces of the ARVN, the Civil Guard, and the Self-Defense Corps. Unfortunately, the ARVN proved themselves incapable of acting as a screen against the enemy, and the brunt of the Communist attacks fell on the territorial forces.<sup>90</sup>

As a result, the Civil Guard and the Self-Defense Corps (later renamed Popular Force and Regional Force) suffered serious casualties, with a consequent reduction in morale and an increase in desertion. For example, during the first six months of 1962, the Self-Defense Corps and Civil Guard suffered eighty percent of the armed forces casualties. Morale not only suffered from the heavy losses, but inadequate pay and benefits played a big part, which were

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88. John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup With a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 128. For a concise history of the CIDGs history, see Major Darrell W. Carr, "Civil Defense Forces in Counterinsurgency: An Analysis of the Civilian Irregular Defense Group in Vietnam," Master's Thesis, US Army Command and General Staff College 2012, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Darrell Carr Collection, Box 01, Folder 01, *Item Number: 25100101001*, 2012. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2510/25100101001.pdf>.

89. Colonel Francis J. Kelly "US Army Special Forces 1961-1971," (Washington, DC: Department of the Army. 1985). <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/286/2861405001a.pdf>.

90. For a look at where the Civil Guard and the Self Defense Corps started, see "Review of Self-Defense Corps," 31 October 1957, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Michigan State University Archives & Historical Collections: Ralph F. Turner Papers, Box 1695, Folder 16, Item Number: 6-20-1607-116-UA17-149\_000099, 31 October 1957. [https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/msu/6-20-1607-116-UA17-149\\_000099.pdf](https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/msu/6-20-1607-116-UA17-149_000099.pdf). See also "Staff Study," Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive Collection, Box 0007, Folder 0654, Item Number: F030600070654, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/F0306/F030600070654.pdf>.

considerably less than those for the ARVN. Disability pay and death benefits, if paid at all, were often long delayed, and benefits for family dependents were virtually nonexistent. Terms of service were four years compared with a two-year term for ARVN conscripts. And finally, a most serious constraint was the inexperienced and for the most part incompetent leadership of these forces that existed at all levels.<sup>91</sup>

### **Viet Cong Reaction**

The reaction of the Viet Cong to both the Strategic Hamlet and the associated counterinsurgency programs during its first year was muted and low key. This does not mean that they were unconcerned; in fact, documents captured at the time of Operation Sunrise revealed considerable enemy apprehension about the effects of the campaign. Young men were returning to their native villages, intelligence agents were being arrested, tax collections were falling off, and travel from one base area to another base area was becoming more difficult and dangerous.<sup>92</sup>

It is fairly clear that the insurgents were confronted by something of a dilemma, for any overt assault on the hamlets and their newly formed institutions ran the risk of alienating the people and diminishing their support for the insurgency. The Viet Cong, therefore, confined themselves to four lines of action during the first year: continual propaganda against the strategic hamlets as concentration camps; penetration of the hamlets by Viet Cong agents and supporters;

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91. Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York: NYU Press, October 2009), 73–77. Nearly 500,000 units served on a voluntary, part-time basis and were the lowest paid in 1974.

92. There were some with a decidedly pessimistic view of such sunny forecasts. For more realistic observations of what was seen in the field by those tasked to assist the South Vietnamese, see “Optimistic Reporting by US Military Advisors in Vietnam During the Kennedy Administration,” Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, William Colby Collection, Box 03, Folder 10, Item Number: 0440310001, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/044/0440310001.pdf>.

the maintenance of pockets of contested territory under Viet Cong control; and the preservation of regular units, which were rarely committed to a major action during this period.<sup>93</sup>

Beginning in July 1963, however, the Viet Cong started to attack the strategic hamlets in force. This offensive coincided with the Diem regime's clash with the Buddhists and the deterioration of US-Government of Vietnam relations. The attacks on the strategic hamlets followed a general pattern. As a primary objective, the Viet Cong struck at the radio transmitters in the hamlets to isolate the villagers from Government of Vietnam protection. Hamlet militia posts were repeatedly attacked, and walls and fortifications around the hamlets were destroyed, an action which underscored the failure of the South Vietnamese government to provide the protection that it promised. In some cases, the attacks escalated to the point that hamlet residents were forced to return to their previous villages and rebuild the homes that the Government of Vietnam had destroyed.<sup>94</sup> Adding to the misery, the various social and economic benefits which were supposed to accompany the Strategic Hamlet Program often did not materialize in the face of the Communist harassment of government representatives. School teachers were killed, and

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93. For an example of Viet Cong propaganda on Strategic Hamlets and South Vietnamese efforts to confront them, see "US Puppet "Policy" of Concentrating People Doomed to Failure," Hanoi VNA International Service in English, 30 November 1963, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 01—Assessment and Strategy, Box 03, Folder 02, Item Number: 2120302008, 30 November 1963. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/212/2120302008.pdf>. See also "The American Crime of Genocide in South Viet Nam," (South Viet Nam, Giai Phong Publishing House, 1968), Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 11—Monographs, Box 06, Folder 01, Item Number: 2390601005, October 1967. [https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital\\_objects/73873](https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/73873). "Each family received compensation and aid. One item deserves explanation, the 1,500 piasters reputedly paid to each family. Each family actually received, initially, 1,500 piasters or credit. If everything had been lost, a house and household equipment was provided and charged against the 1,500 credit. Therefore, that particular household received not a piaster. If a family brought everything with them and needed no assistance they used up no credit and received 1,500 piasters. Most of the families fell somewhere in between," recounted in "Operation Sunrise," 2, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Rufus Phillips Collection, Box 01, Folder 31, Item Number: 23970131052, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2397/23970131052.pdf>.

94. Mike Mansfield, "Two Reports on Vietnam and Southeast Asia to the President of the United States," Report No. 1 to President John F. Kennedy—"Southeast Asia-Vietnam"—December 18, 1962; Report No. 2 to President Lyndon B. Johnson—"Vietnam: The Situation and Outlook:— December 17, 1965 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1978). <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/239/2390705005.pdf>. Clear-eyed reports were getting through to President Kennedy about what was going on in the countryside within South Vietnam. Senator Mike Mansfield saw extensive service with the US Marine Corps in the Far East and he reported to Kennedy on what he saw there.

anti-malaria teams were attacked and their medical supplies were stolen. In addition, the general overextension of the Strategic Hamlet Program played right into the Viet Cong's hands. In some areas, government control was so weak that, while the Viet Cong permitted the establishment of strategic hamlets, the inhabitants allowed the insurgents to pass through the fortifications freely.<sup>95</sup>

### **The House of Ngo Falls**

Contrary to popular belief, the assassination of President Diem and Ngo Dinh Nhu did not bring about the sudden end of the Strategic Hamlet Program. The end of the program had been coming for some time. By mid-1963, attacks had been increasing against the hamlets, especially in the populous Mekong Delta area, and many previously secure hamlets had been lost to the Viet Cong. With the death of the president and his brother, many generals in an attempt to maintain their long-held power, quickly disassociated themselves from anything to do with Diem's regime. Consequently, the Strategic Hamlet Program simply fell apart. Why? There are several reasons that had a major impact on both Nhu and Diem's efforts, many that observers on the ground had reported for years. It was only with the demise of the Ngo brothers that the outcome became obvious.<sup>96</sup>

In the chaos and confusion that followed the coup in November 1963, there was little time for the Strategic Hamlet Program. Officials at all government levels were unsure how to proceed. They had no prepared policy and took too long to make decisions on the future of the strategic hamlets. Most provincial and local officials were replaced and over the next few months, there were frequent and repeated changes to these appointments.<sup>97</sup> A paralysis of policy

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95. Young, "Stability in Rural Vietnam."

96. *Pentagon Papers*, Vol. 2, 128–59

97. Sir Robert Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 139.

and action continued as governments changed throughout 1964. In this environment, both government officials and the peasants were reluctant to commit themselves to a program associated with the Diem regime and clearly falling apart. The Viet Cong efficiently filled the void left by the strategic hamlets. They filled it so efficiently, that by the end of 1964, Thompson assessed that the government was losing control in the countryside, and “the villages were beginning to encircle the towns.”<sup>98</sup>

The Strategic Hamlet Program failed for a great many reasons. Primary among these were inadequate planning and coordination, inadequate resources, a totally unrealistic timetable, problems with location and construction, and inadequate and false evaluation of what was being accomplished. Other reasons for the failure of the program were the narrow and selfish view of Diem and Nhu of what they wanted to achieve, highlighted by a lack of commitment to the program, an inappropriate and complicated administrative structure that had little coordinative power.

Above all these reasons, the South Vietnamese peasants who had been identified as the focus of the Strategic Hamlet Program, resented and largely rejected the program because they perceived that there was little in it for them. This feeling was accentuated by corrupt and uncaring government officials more interested in themselves than the people in the countryside.

One outstanding question remains and it’s just as relevant today as it was forty years ago, relates to the ability of the United States to act as a constructive and reliable partner in assisting a country faced with an insurgency. A country seeking support should be concerned that it receives consistent and reliable support, generally free of demands for social and administrative reform. In South Vietnam, the United States was unable to meet these requirements. Support was neither consistent nor was it properly related to the true nature of the problem. Instead of being aimed at

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98. Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency*, 140

the root causes of the insurgency, the aid effort was seriously diluted by a focus on the threat of a conventional invasion from the north. In 1963, the threats to withdraw support indicated the unreliable nature of the United States in providing support. The United States was unable to commit itself to a long-term view of the problem even though it was recognized that, as in Malaya, the problems of insurgency could not be solved overnight.

The demands for social and political reform placed on President Diem demonstrated the intolerance of the United States for a political system other than one modeled after its own. Had the United States been able to accept Diem's rule as a less than "perfect" government and had it committed itself to the long-term support of his government and his policies, especially pacification, events may have proceeded differently. Certainly the "Americanization" of the war from 1964 proved a less than satisfactory alternate solution to the problems of South Vietnam.



## Chapter 8

### Conclusion

*Awareness of our limitations should make us wary  
of condemning those who make mistakes, but we  
condemn ourselves if we fail to recognize mistakes.<sup>1</sup>*

*B. H. Liddell Hart*

What sort of lessons should we look for from the Vietnamese War? It is fashionable to quote Santayana's warning that those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it?<sup>2</sup> This would seem to be a prudent caution for a serious student of war and diplomacy. But it is equally possible that our bitterly won knowledge of conducting a counterinsurgency may be irrelevant, as the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have debunked the lie that the United States would never again be involved in a situation that even remotely approximates the conditions of Vietnam.<sup>3</sup> No more proof need be given that we continue to become involved in "wars of choice," than the disregard of recent American administrations to the "Nixon Doctrine," which supposedly codified the post-Vietnam US foreign policy posture by limiting the character of US assistance: "We shall furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments. But we shall look to the nation directly threatened to assume the primary responsibility of providing the manpower for its defense."<sup>4</sup>

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1. B. H. Liddell Hart, *Why Don't We Learn from History?* (London: Sophron Editor, 27 February 2012), 21.

2. George Santayana, *The Life of Reason*, New Edition (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1 May 1998), 284.

3. Richard Nixon, *No More Vietnams* (New York: Avon Books, November 1994). Nixon response to the "Vietnam Syndrome" was to directly confront those who said that the United States should stay out of countries like El Salvador and Nicaragua, by replying that the lesson of Vietnam is not that the United States should stay out such places again, but that "we will not fail again."

4. "President Nixon's November 3 Speech," Potomac Cable, November 5, 1969, November 5, 1969, Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 02—Military Operations, Box 14, Folder 13, Item Number: 2131413133, November 5, 1969. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/213/2131413133.pdf>. To hear audio of Nixon's speech, see November 3, 1969: Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam, 3 Nov 1969, University of Virginia, Miller Center, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/november-3-1969-address-nation-war-vietnam>.

Professor Samuel P. Huntington went a step further; he warned that with Vietnam: if we remember the past we are condemned to misread it. . . . The right lesson, in short, may be the un-lesson. . . . the Vietnam problem was a legacy of Western colonial rule. . . . Vietnam was, in addition, the one European colony [in which] . . . Communist groups established an early ascendancy in the nationalist movement. The struggle for independence led to a divided country, a sequence of events which seems unlikely to be duplicated again in the future. Finally, the American involvement in Vietnam came at the end of a cycle of active American concern with foreign affairs which seems unlikely to be repeated for some time in the future. Every historical event or confluence of events obviously is unique.<sup>5</sup>

If it were true that the Vietnam War was unique, it does not make its lessons irrelevant. All events are in a superficial sense unique; it is their components that we separate out for comparison that give meaning and that we can take as a warning.

### **A Failed Effort**

The escalation period of the Vietnam War, from 1955 to 1965, mirrored the Cold War in that the United States and USSR avoided direct conflict—and thereby the possibility of nuclear war—by operating through proxy governments and forces. Unfortunately for the United States, from its very inception, the South Vietnamese government was weak and corrupt with little administrative expertise. The North Vietnamese government under Ho Chi Minh was a fiercely

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5. Samuel P. Huntington, “Military Intervention, Political Involvement, and the Unlessons of Vietnam” (Chicago: The Adlai Stevenson Institute of Internal Affairs, 1968), 1–2. Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 01—Assessment and Strategy, Box 10, Folder 02, Item Number: 2121002011, 03 June 1968. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/212/2121002011.pdf>.

proud and independent group of nationalists willing to fight endlessly against foreign dominance and for Vietnamese unification.

Due to the spirit of the times, the United States rejected Franklin Roosevelt's anti-imperialist policies and procedures and adopted a strident anti-Communist stance and antagonized the North Vietnamese by inserting themselves into what was in reality a Vietnamese civil war. In its zeal to battle Communism, the United States essentially ended up assuming the hated role of imperial master in Vietnam. As a result, when the United States sent troops into the territory in 1965, they found a far different situation than any other they had faced up to that point in the Cold War.

After years of bureaucratic infighting, the US-Government of Vietnam war effort in Vietnam to combat the Vietnamese Communists underground in South Vietnam remained unfocused and under the control of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem and his brother Nhu. Up to this time, North Vietnam and its surrogate infrastructure in the south, the Viet Cong, had been successful in evading or countering US-South Vietnamese efforts to protect the population in both the Agrovillage and Strategic Hamlet Programs. It was only after much internal bureaucratic sparring between the Government of Vietnam and the US that intelligence efforts were more fully coordinated and were, in turn, integrated more fully with the efforts of the Saigon government.

At the insistence of the Americans, Diem's government became focused on a key long-term goal of tracking down and removing—either by killing, capture, interrogation, or imprisonment—Communist agents involved in the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam. The National Liberation Front was the core coordination mechanism of the Communist enemy infiltrating South Vietnam from the North. The government in Hanoi, under Ho Chi Minh, spent

decades developing an organization of highly centralized policy and logistical control, coupled with a decentralized network of thoroughly trained agents in the south. The Communist subversive organization—or Viet Cong infrastructure—organized and controlled the countryside by means of organization, intimidation, political assassination, and propaganda. This was what the combined efforts of the United States and the Government of South Vietnam had to combat. The preceding chapters of this dissertation explained the nature of Communist successes in controlling the Vietnam countryside. Operational control was delegated to the hardcore agents at both district and village levels, where the great majority of the population—eighty percent—lived. Communist efforts concentrated on organizing the farmers into “fronts,” which by 1960, had supplied the rationale for the creation of the National Liberation Front for South Vietnam.

Communist agents also sought to penetrate and weaken the Government of Vietnam urban areas as well. Throughout the country, assassination teams selectively targeted effective administrators, while employing terror tactics to intimidate the population. Led by dedicated Communist agents, all civic organizations were incorporated into fronts, creating a shadow government in opposition to the Government of South Vietnam. An important distinction was that the Viet Cong was not essentially concerned with popular or voluntary support; it sought control. The Viet Cong offered the people only one choice: either incur the active enmity of the Viet Cong, or refuse to cooperate with the Government of South Vietnam. As the Viet Cong organization expanded in the years prior to 1963, Viet Cong violence was designed to achieve the desired results by punishing anti-Viet Cong or pro-Government activities.

This forces us to ask a question: why did neither the United States nor the Government of South Vietnam respond in kind to Viet Cong tactics during the mid-1950s to 1963? In 1962, a recommendation by Roger Hilsman and Michael Forrestal was made to then President Kennedy,

to develop a pacification program in Vietnam. As envisioned, the program was to be under civilian control at the village level, with lines of command extending upward to the central government of President Diem. This program would counter the successful subversion of the countryside by the Communists. Despite failure, a properly resourced and coordinated pacification campaign remains a viable response to an insurgency situation. A program such as the Strategic Hamlet Program, designed to achieve security, as well as economic, social, and political reform remains a viable component of a pacification program. The Strategic Hamlet Program in South Vietnam was an attempt at such a program. However, because of problems in implementation and design, the program was not able to realize its full potential and subsequently failed.

The Diem government, however, persisted in its emphasis on central control and policy direction from Saigon in both the Agrovilles and the Strategic Hamlet Programs. As has been discussed previously, the villages were given little if anything for their own defense. The South Vietnamese regular army, designed and equipped by the US military, was organized and trained to repel an invasion from the north, or to fight conventional battles. The assassination of President Diem in 1963, and the later introduction of US troops in 1965, did not change matters. To gain control of a rapidly deteriorating situation, American and South Vietnamese forces placed greater emphasis on stabilizing the government, and containing Viet Cong activities in the countryside received a lower priority.

Why did such a cumulatively enormous effort which had been taking place since 1954 have such limited impact for so long? Why did it involve such disproportionate costs and disastrous side effects to both the Vietnamese and to the Americans who advised and supported them?

Several reasons were given throughout this dissertation. Among them, of course, was the unique and highly unfamiliar conflict environment in which America found itself. Another was the sharp contrast between the enemy they faced—an ideologically determined, centrally directed, tough-minded regime in the north, with a highly disciplined, revolutionary apparatus established in the south. The south was only a half-formed nation, with a weak, corrupt, traditionalist regime. As the American observers in Vietnam pointed out, both the American leadership and the South Vietnamese themselves frequently misjudged the enemy. The decision-makers underestimated the enemy's ability to frustrate our tactics by evading contact and to counter-escalate against us at every stage up to the President Diem's assassination in 1963 and beyond. Lastly of course, the incremental nature of the US response of Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson. At each point, they chose to do only what was minimally necessary at each stage of the insurgency in the hope that the South Vietnamese would establish themselves if given enough training, aid, and time.<sup>6</sup>

As a result, the civilian agencies with the responsibility for pacification were left to fend for themselves, and these agencies—USAID, CIA, the US Information Agency (USIA), the US Embassy, and the US State Department—failed completely. USAID was responsible for advising the national police and the Chieu Hoi Program for Viet Cong defectors. The USIA was responsible for propaganda. The CIA was in charge of developing, testing, and persuading Saigon to implement pacification and intelligence programs. It became glaringly clear that the

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6. For a review of the steps President Kennedy enacted leading to an escalation of the war, see David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2000); Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

American civilian agencies in Saigon—USAID, CIA, USIA, and the US Embassy—could not or would not coordinate and pool their resources to create a viable pacification program. They were unable to work effectively with their South Vietnamese counterparts, who were themselves inefficiently organized, contradictory in their goals, and corrupt in their practices. Bureaucratic interests continued to dominate the American and South Vietnamese civilian agencies even in the face of disaster.

Nor was the American military exempt from criticism. The US military was responsible for advising and upgrading the Vietnamese Territorial Forces (popular forces and regional forces) which were based at province and district levels. However, the greatest emphasis for support remained with the country's conventional military forces. These loosely organized units represented 400,000 local troops but were poorly paid, equipped, or trained, and when called upon to defend their homes were inadequate to counter the Communist insurgents.

There were critical structural problems within the pacification effort that plagued successful implementation. Due to President Diem's insistence on retaining control and his refusal to delegate authority, each South Vietnamese organization—regional forces, popular forces, or police field forces—were vertically structured and controlled and had to refer all plans and recommendations to Saigon prior to implementation. The result was a delay and bureaucratic competition for resources. And after years of neglect by the South Vietnamese's stubborn determination to retain control in Saigon, when the crisis came, there was no mechanism in place to provide centralized coordination to keep the country unified and stable.

Reaction to Communist paramilitary, organizational, and terrorist activities could consistently be categorized as too little and too late. A structured organization dedicated to coordinate efforts between the South Vietnamese and the US did not become into being until the

Military Assistance Command, Vietnam in 1962, much too late to stave off a disaster. The Viet Cong Infrastructure, which, despite Communist main force losses, continued to be able not only to survive but also to replace its battlefield losses, select its targets, carry out political strategy, and even create a shadow government which collected taxes. It also developed external diplomatic ties with the Communist Bloc nations, India, and Indonesia.

Johnson did not need that retrospective appraisal to launch a more vigorous campaign against the Communists, for his first impulse as the new president was to shift the war into higher gear. Meeting with his top civilian advisers on Vietnam, Johnson told them to forget about the social, economic, and political reforms that Kennedy had stressed. Victory in the military conflict became the new administration's top priority. Hoping to apply more pressure on the Communists, the administration began to implement a series of tactics it had adopted in principle within the first week of Johnson's presidency. These included a more aggressive propaganda offensive as well as sabotage directed against North Vietnam.<sup>7</sup>

### **One Final Thought**

A review of the literature contained within this dissertation has suggested that we could not win the Vietnam War—at least not in any meaningful sense and at an acceptable cost, because of the way we fought it. But this still begs the question of why we fought the way we did. I think the answer lies in an as yet neglected dimension of the Vietnam War, the impact of institutional factors—bureaucratic constraints.<sup>8</sup> In effect, both governments attempted to cope with a highly atypical conflict situation through institutions designed for quite different purposes.

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7. For more on this, see Edward C. Keefer, ed. *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS), 1961–1963: Vietnam, August-December 1963* NSAM 273 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1991), 4:637. All quotes found in David Coleman and Marc Selverstone, “Lyndon B. Johnson and the Vietnam War,” Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia. <https://prde.upress.virginia.edu/content/Vietnam#fn8>.

8. For more on bureaucratic constraints. See Robert Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1972).



The typical behavior patterns of these organizations influenced not only the decisions made but what was actually done in the field: the performance of the units trained and advised by the Americans and the political and policy decisions made in Saigon. They also influenced the very way in which the South Vietnamese and their American allies responded to the Viet Cong threat. In the case of the Agrovillage and the Strategic Hamlet Programs, sheer bureaucratic inertia, another institutional factor, made American and Vietnamese governmental organizations very slow to change their ingrained institutional behavior patterns.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, there was a whole set of real-life constraints inherent in the way both the South Vietnamese and American organizations operated, which made them unable to adapt sufficiently to the unique and unfamiliar conflict environment of Vietnam. Though by no means the whole story, these factors did much to help render the American and Government of Vietnam response unduly conventional, wasteful, and slow to adapt compared to the Viet Cong.<sup>10</sup>

I believe that Maxwell Taylor said it best when he stated: “First, we didn’t know ourselves. We thought we were going into another Korean war, but this was a different country. Secondly, we didn’t know our South Vietnamese allies. We never understood them, and that was another surprise. And we knew even less about North Vietnam. Who was Ho Chi Minh? Nobody really knew. So, until we know the enemy and know our allies and know ourselves, we’d better keep out of this dirty kind of business. It’s very dangerous.”<sup>11</sup>

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9. For a thorough review of the perceptual logic which guided the US’s approach to the problem of the war in South Vietnam, see Charlie Cook, “Perception.” Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive, Rufus Phillips Collection, Box 03, Folder 14, Item Number: 23970314021, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/2397/23970314021.pdf>.

10. Charlie Cook, “Perception.”

11. Douglas Kinnard, *The Certain Trumpet: Maxwell Taylor and the American Experience in Vietnam* (Sterling, VA: Potomac Books Inc., 1991), 198.

## Aftermath

Up until the recent wars in Iraq, and especially Afghanistan, the Vietnam War is likely the most problematic of all the wars in American history. From an American point of view Vietnam was a morally ambiguous conflict from the start, ostensibly a war against Communism yet also a war to thwart national sovereignty. Reading American exit interviews of those tasked to advise and support the South Vietnamese reveals a conflict rife with paradoxes: Tasked to support and protect the South Vietnamese, the United States propped up a dictatorial regime in headquartered in Saigon; later in the war the US military destroyed villages to save them. US objectives were often poorly defined during the Vietnam war. The United States would “Americanize” the war, only to “Vietnamize” it five years later. The American media sometimes represented tactical victories as terrible defeats, while the US military kept meticulous enemy body counts without any clear method of distinguishing the bodies of the hostile Viet Cong from those of the friendly South Vietnamese. If there is any consensus to be found perhaps it would be that whatever the reasons we intervened in Vietnam, even if the ultimate outcome had not been a disaster, the results achieved would hardly have been proportionate to the immense human and material costs incurred.<sup>12</sup>

In summary, pacification was everyone’s business but no one’s responsibility from 1956–63. Pacification did not so much fail as a program; rather, it simply was not attempted on a major scale. Instead of adapting to the local circumstances in Vietnam, we fought the enemy our way at horrendous costs and with some tragic side effects, because we lacked the capability to do

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12. “Statistics on U.S. Participation in The Vietnam Conflict, With Addendum,” Texas Tech University, Vietnam Center and Archive., Douglas Pike Collection: Unit 03—Statistical Data, Box 43, Folder 02, Item Number: 2234302005, n.d. <https://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/reports/images.php?img=/images/223/2234302005.pdf>.

otherwise. In effect, we imported the American style of war to Vietnam. It was our style, we understood its strengths and weaknesses, it worked in two world wars and Korea.

## **Recommendations**

After reading forty years' worth of retrospective analysis of what went wrong in America's attempt to support and advise the South Vietnamese, along with a careful reading of the *Pentagon Papers*, several general military lessons from the Vietnam War present themselves.

They are:

1. The effective conduct of military operations rests vitally upon a political infrastructure which is capable of attracting sustained popular support and minimizing the need for heavy reliance upon outside forces such as those provided by the United States. The United States must not be more willing to defend an ally than the ally is willing to defend itself.
2. The need to fully understand the close relationship between domestic politics and foreign policy, especially in a country such as the United States. The implication is that the United States cannot support, over a long period, a large-scale US military intervention unless direct American national interests appear to be vitally affected and can be demonstrated as being vitally affected. The American military's unfortunate experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan have only reinforced this point. Unlike in Vietnam, there was no conscription and in those wars, the military relied on involuntarily extending service members within the ranks to offset military manpower shortages.
3. The existence of gaps in historical experience, culture, and the nature of respective goals makes it essential to have a more broadly based understanding of

the country in which military operations are being conducted. This was not the case in Vietnam, at least in the early stages of the conflict. The lack of such understanding leads to the development of policies, strategies, and capabilities based largely upon a US experience rather than that of an adversary whom we confront or an ally whom we seek to assist. It also leads potentially to a miscalculation as to the other side's willingness to absorb losses, a problem which is inherent in the calculation of the costs to the opponent of a war of attrition.

4. The need to more precisely define the nature of US goals. US goals appear never to have been adequately defined in such a way as to be understood and accepted by a substantial segment of the US population. The criteria for judging US success or failure in Vietnam were not fully developed, enunciated, or understood among either the South Vietnamese or the American people.

## Afterword

Kingsley Amis once declared that if someone is not annoyed by what you write, you have not done your job. I'd also add that at the age of fifty-eight, I've come to believe that all works of nonfiction are to some degree autobiographical and this one more than most. Given the bitterness or unbending opinions that inevitably come to the surface with any discussion of the Vietnam War, and given the subject of this dissertation, I believe that some personal perspective might be in order. Think of it if you will as full disclosure.

And no, I did not participate in the Vietnam War, but I was in support during Desert Storm/Desert Shield and directly participated in the Second Iraq War and Afghanistan in somewhat the same guise as the soldiers whose Vietnam experiences I used in this dissertation.

I wrote this dissertation as a form of therapy in an attempt to come to terms with what I had both observed and undergone in Iraq and Afghanistan. Those experiences can only truly be understood by someone who has “seen the elephant.” Although I was much too young to experience the Vietnam War first hand, my father religiously watched the evening news programs, primarily CBS's Walter Cronkite, on television each evening. It was, in critic Michael Aden's phrase, “the living-room war” and it was the backdrop of my formative years.<sup>1</sup> For my father, the war was deeply personal with eight members of our extended family serving in that conflict. Seven of these men returned from their tours in Vietnam to go on to work in the coal fields and steel mills around my hometown. They found work, started families, and got on with their lives. During family gatherings, their experiences were never talked about when children

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1. David Bianculli, *Teletiteracy: Taking Television Seriously* (Chapel Hill, NC: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 86. Michael Aden's phrase, “the living-room war” was used to illustrate the effect of television coverage of the Vietnam War on the American people. Bianculli emphasized that the “narration” of any war—how it is presented to the people by its government—is becoming increasingly critical in sustaining popular support in the age of visual media.

were present. Other than occasionally wearing an old field jacket or “boonie hat,” no items were ever displayed in their homes indicating their military service. Over the years, my efforts to get them to tell me stories of the war were repeatedly met with vague, cryptic remarks that in effect said nothing and after a while, I just stopped asking.<sup>2</sup>

It was thirty-five years later, and only after I had returned from the second of my four tours in a war zone, that these same men finally started talking about their experiences in Vietnam. My own wartime service established a shared bond and it is only now that the surviving members of my family will talk, if not always easily or freely, at least candidly with me about what they saw and did during their war and how they were treated when they came home. Reflecting on their experiences provided me with a much-needed insight into the difficulties I have come to believe all returning soldiers undergo when trying to reintegrate into a society that does not fully understand them. This simple realization had a profound effect on me and started a chain of events leading to this work.

It wasn't until the spring of 2008 when I was stationed at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, that I had a personal breakthrough when, in researching my dissertation topic, I had a series of extraordinary, offhand conversations with a few retired officers at Fort Leavenworth who had served in Vietnam as advisors. It was through these discussions that a germ of an idea formed. Through them, I discovered that there existed copies of the exit interviews conducted on

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2. In talks among my family, the impact of Walter Cronkite in shaping the debate on the war came up several times. At the time of the Tet Offensive, his popularity and status within the Washington elite and among the wider American population was unrivaled. In talking with my family, the one member that remained convinced that victory was possible in Vietnam remarked that “after Uncle Walter said we should get out—we got out.” Possibly the most heartbreaking interview conducted prior to the Americanization of the war was between Cronkite and President John F. Kennedy at the presidential residential compound in Hyannis Port, MA., and it pointed to the problem that the US would face in the years ahead, “I don't think that unless a greater effort is made by the government to win popular support that the war can be won out there. In the final analysis, it is their war. They are the ones who have to win or lose it. We can help them, we can give them equipment, we can send our men out there as advisers, but they have to win it.” See John F. Kennedy Interview by Walter Cronkite, *CBS*, September 2, 1963. John F. Kennedy Presidential Library & Museum, Boston, MA., doi: JFKWHA-212-002.

Vietnam advisors returning from the war and that copies of these interviews were stored locally at the Combined Arms Research Library at Fort Leavenworth. These now rarely opened, even semi-forgotten, reports were a revelation to me. By studying what had taken place in South Vietnam, I could better make sense of how a technologically advanced military superpower could be frustrated by a defeated Third World nation (Iraq) and illiterate tribesmen from a medieval non-state (Afghanistan). How could we win every battle and yet fail to pacify people who refused to recognize their own defeat?

For the next eight weeks, I conducted an extensive review of many of those interviews and mentally placed them in three distinct categories. The first are those done by soldiers or Marines clearly impatient to separate from the service. The second group can best be described as those on a “careerist” path hoping to remain within the military. The final third of these interviews were the ones that kept me up late at night reading. It was these reports that placed my own difficulties in advising in a broader context and gave a poignant verification that my own wartime experiences were not abnormal.

Many of the men interviewed were inarticulate, some were frighteningly blunt, and a few were movingly eloquent. But what caused me to keep reading late into the night, what lifted my spirits even when what was being said was ghastly, was that they *cared*; their commitment in telling their stories in the hope of helping others about to deploy to Vietnam jumped off the page. Many times, I caught myself nodding my head at what I was reading, substituting the words Afghanistan or Iraq for Vietnam. I was both intrigued and depressed at what I was reading. I was also hooked.

When I was later asked by friends and family what helped me most in regaining a sense of normalcy after serving in two wars within the space of ten years, I point to the discovery of

those exit interviews as a turning point in my life. Through them, I developed a greater understanding of the frustrations endemic to serving with soldiers outside of my own culture and I have a greater appreciation for those precious few who do it repeatedly and who do it well.

The selection of this research topic stems from a personal interest in the current debate on the use of advisors within the Army to confront the insurgencies in both Iraq and Afghanistan. Conversations with fellow military officers at Fort Leavenworth disclosed many were convinced the nation effectively utilized traditional elements of national power—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic—to wage and win the war. Others, especially those with recent experience advising Iraqi and Afghanistan forces, stayed adamant in their belief the US was not winning the war or, at least, that the US failed to use some or all elements of national power effectively. Divisive debate continues within the Army community concerning the effective use of advisors in a counterinsurgency struggle.

It is the author's hope that this dissertation will contribute to the understanding of the use and evolution of advisors programs during the Vietnam War and provide insights that have application to present-day operations.



## Appendix A

### Glossary

#### Note on Military Acronyms and Jargon

It is the author's intention to use only generally understood acronyms and jargon of the Vietnam era within this dissertation, but to aid the reader, a Glossary is provided. The author believes that the use of acronyms within both the US military and its government has reached a level bordering on the absurd and has therefore sought to limit their use within this dissertation. On those occasions within the dissertation where the use of military acronyms and jargon is necessary to provide context, they will be kept to a minimum so as not to impede those reading the dissertation and understanding the narrative.

<b>ARVN</b>	Army of the Republic of Vietnam (South)
<b>BRIAM</b>	British Advisory Mission
<b>CG</b>	Civil Guard (South Vietnam)
<b>CGLD</b>	Commissariat General for Land Development
<b>CIA</b>	Central Intelligence Agency
<b>CIDG</b>	Civilian Irregular Defense Group (South Vietnam)
<b>CMH</b>	Center of Military History
<b>CORDS</b>	Civil Operations and Revolutionary (later "Rural") Development Support
<b>COPROR</b>	Interagency Committee for Province Rehabilitation
<b>COSVN</b>	Central Office for South Vietnam
<b>DARPA</b>	Defense Advanced Project Agency
<b>DEPCORDS</b>	Deputy for CORDS
<b>DMZ</b>	Demilitarized Zone
<b>DRV</b>	Democratic Republic of Vietnam
<b>DTIC</b>	Defense Technical Information Center
<b>FOIA</b>	Freedom of Information Act

<b>FRUS</b>	Foreign Relations of United States
<b>GVN</b>	Government of Vietnam (South)
<b>ICP</b>	IndoChinese Communist Party
<b>INR</b>	Bureau of Intelligence and Research
<b>KGB</b>	Committee for State Security (former USSR)
<b>KMT</b>	Nationalist Party of China
<b>MAAG</b>	Military Assistance Advisory Group (US)
<b>MACV</b>	Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (US)
<b>MACCORDS</b>	Military Assistance Command, Civilian Operations for Revolutionary Development Support
<b>MAP</b>	Military Assistance Program
<b>MSU</b>	Michigan State University
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
<b>NLF</b>	National Liberation Front
<b>NRM</b>	National Revolutionary Movement
<b>NSC</b>	National Security Council (US)
<b>NVA</b>	North Vietnamese Army
<b>PRG</b>	Provisional Revolutionary Government
<b>PSYOP</b>	Psychological Operations
<b>RVN</b>	Republic of Vietnam (South)
<b>RVNAF</b>	Republic of Vietnam Armed Forces
<b>SDC</b>	Self Defense Corps (South Vietnam)
<b>SEATO</b>	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
<b>SNIE</b>	Special National Intelligence Estimates

<b>SWNCC</b>	State-War-Navy Coordinating Committee (Japan)
<b>TIRS</b>	Terrorist Incident Reporting System
<b>US</b>	United States
<b>USAID</b>	Agency for International Development
<b>USIA</b>	US Information Agency
<b>USOM</b>	United States Operations Mission
<b>VC</b>	Viet Cong
<b>VCI</b>	Viet Cong Infrastructure

## Appendix B

### **Bibliography**

#### **Official Records**

The following Official Records used in the preparation of this work fall into two broad categories: those that have been accessioned by the National Archives and are identifiable by record group (RG) number, and those still in the custody of various government agencies that have not been evaluated or processed by an archivist. The latter only occasionally have identifying numbers; since these numbers will lose their identifying function once the records have been processed by National Archives, they have not been included in citations. Copies of many of the documents cited in the endnotes have been collected and are on file in the National Archives and the US Army Center of Military History (CMH) in Washington, DC, for permanent retention. Of particular value are the so-called Army G-2 10 files (RG 319)—a reference collection incorporating not only intelligence documents originated by the US Army but information received from foreign governments, the State Department, and other US intelligence agencies.

#### **Record Key**

##### *National Archives*

Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs (ASD, ISA) and the Office of Military Assistance, (RG 330).

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The following is not intended to be all inclusive, but to represent a cross section of those exit interviews that the author reviewed in the preparation of this dissertation. For those interested in reading more on the experiences of those American advisors assigned to assist the South Vietnamese see additional Senior Officer Debriefing Reports found within both the National Archives and also located at the Defense Technical Information Center (DTIC) at 8725 John J. Kingman Road, Suite 0944, Fort Belvoir, VA 22060-6218.

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