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THE PACIFICATION EFFORT IN VIETNAM

CONCLUSIONS

A. The pacification program as a whole has made a significant contribution to the prosecution of the war and strengthened the political position of the Government of South Vietnam (GVN) vis-a-vis the Communists. Thus far the GVN's principal success has been in expanding its presence into the countryside. Providing permanent security for these gains has been more difficult. Security conditions continue to fluctuate with the intensity of combat. Low level terrorism, political agitation, and propaganda efforts by the Viet Cong (VC) continue to hamper progress, particularly since no more than a promising start has been made in reducing the effectiveness of the VC infrastructure. A large part of the countryside is still contested and subject to the continuing control of neither side.

B. As for gaining the allegiance of the people, this is almost impossible to measure. The turnout in the 1967 elections and the failure of the Communists to gain popular support at Tet suggest progress. Apprehension over the settlement of the war and the firmness of the American commitment tends to reduce popular confidence. The most common attitude among the peasants, however, continues to be one of war-weariness and apathy.

C. Saigon now seems finally to have accepted the need for a vigorous pacification effort. However, progress may still be hampered by the political situation in Saigon, continuing inefficiency, corruption, and the parochial concerns of the GVN.

D. Another major uncertainty is how much time is left to make up past deficiencies and consolidate current gains. Over the next several months, further progress in pacification will almost certainly not make the GVN much more able to cope with the VC, given peacetime

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conditions, than it would be today; a significant advance in this respect would probably require at least a year.

E. Finally, there is the question of how the Communists will react to the growing pressures on them. Despite improvements in the overall security situation, gains in pacification are still vulnerable to adverse military developments. The chances are good that the Communists will attempt to make an intensified effort to counter the gains in pacification and they will probably have some success. Thus, consolidation of gains is likely to continue to be a very slow and uncertain process.

DISCUSSION

I. BACKGROUND

1. Since at least 1959 a pacification program of some kind has been in existence in South Vietnam. Underlying philosophies, relative priorities, specific programs, and the allocation of resources have ebbed and flowed; the ultimate objectives, however, have remained fairly constant. As most recently defined by the Government of South Vietnam (GVN) these are: to improve security in the rural areas and protect them from enemy military activity, to engage the sympathies and loyalties of the peasant and create a viable countrywide administration, and to neutralize the effectiveness and appeal of the Communist political apparatus.

2. Until 1967, the pacification effort was overshadowed by an overall strategy which placed primary emphasis on defeating the enemy's conventional forces. GVN and Allied efforts to secure the countryside were clearly subordinate to the large-unit war; in part this necessarily followed from the character of the war, as more and larger units from North Vietnam were committed to battle. In any event, by the end of 1966 the goals of pacification were still remote.

3. In 1967, significant changes were made in the doctrinal and organizational aspects of pacification. It was finally recognized in practice that there was no single solution to pacification, and that, in fact, there was a close interdependence between all aspects of the military and political struggle. For the first time, significant numbers of specific Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) units were assigned defined roles in support of pacification. More large Allied operations were coordinated with follow-on pacification efforts. The Regional and Popular Forces (RF, PF) were expanded as a critical component of territorial defense, helping to fill an immense void. Plans were laid and implemented to expand the Revolutionary Development teams, to intensify their training, and more clearly to define their security missions. A systematic plan to attack the Viet Cong (VC) political infrastructure (i.e., leadership and organization) was worked out and eventually accepted by the Saigon authorities. Finally, a system

of evaluating various aspects of pacification was tested in practice and accepted (the Hamlet Evaluation System—HES).

4. As a result of all of these efforts, progress was made during 1967. The principal thrust was in expanding the presence of the government and making its influence felt. In terms of security, however, progress was deceptive. Overall ratings based on HES statistics indicated a rapid expansion of GVN presence throughout the country. Some of this progress, however, was the result of changes in the accounting system. More important, the detailed statistics showed that VC military and political activity in hamlets classified as "relatively secure" was actually increasing in the six months before the Tet offensive of January 1968. The highly fragile nature of GVN control was, of course, dramatically demonstrated by the Tet attacks; not only was the government presence in the countryside severely contracted for several months, but the confidence of potential government supporters there must have been badly shaken.

5. In effect, it took most of 1968 to regain lost ground, and some residue of psychological and political damage probably remains. Nevertheless, some progress was made even though Communist forces were engaged in continuing military "offensives" through August. Progress has been much more rapid during the relative lull in combat since then; this is another manifestation of the fact that pacification cannot be separated from the total military situation.

6. Since 1 November, an Accelerated Pacification Campaign (APC) has been underway with the proclaimed goal of adding, by 31 January 1969, 1,200 hamlets to the 5,500 already classified as "relatively secure." Simultaneously, the attack on the VC infrastructure (the Phoenix, or Phung Hoang program) has also been accelerated, after a promising start in 1968.

7. In evaluating these programs, certain basic questions remain: what constitutes "progress," and how permanent is it? In the next section we deal with these questions in terms of the three objectives mentioned at the outset: security, the allegiance of the people, and the effectiveness of the enemy's political-administrative apparatus.

II. EFFECTIVENESS AND VULNERABILITIES

A. Security

8. It has long been recognized that pacification is first of all a question of security. Without continuing protection against Communist military and political forces, there is little chance of winning over an apathetic, war weary peasantry to the side of the GVN. Until recently, the prevailing concept had been to secure limited areas and gradually expand the perimeter of protection. Now, in the APC the GVN appears willing to spread its resources more thinly in order to extend its presence into more and more areas at an increasingly rapid pace. This is partly because the more favorable military position of the Allies has made an expanded effort more feasible. Equally important, the GVN has felt it necessary to respond to the intensified VC efforts to establish Liberation Committees

throughout the country. In effect, both sides want to be in a position to make maximum claims of control over a wide area and a high percentage of the population, should there be an early end to the fighting. The HES currently shows that 76 3 percent of the entire population falls in the "relatively secure" category, 12.3 percent under VC domination, and the remainder "contested." By way of comparison, statistics for February 1967 showed 66 percent of the total population in "relatively secure" areas and 19 percent in those controlled by the VC.

9. These statistics must be regarded with considerable reserve. For example, while the GVN claims that about 65 percent of the rural population is "relatively secure," over half of these live in hamlets where there are varying degrees of VC activity. Thus it is possible to argue that some could be considered as "contested," in which case the overall evaluation would change. Moreover, progress in security as measured by the HES system represents a sum total of reporting on a wide variety of activities related to security, including the level of VC military and political operations. If these latter indicators were considered in isolation, one could conclude that very little progress has been made in the past two years.

10. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that since the introduction of large US forces in 1965 the overall trend in security has been basically favorable to the GVN. Moreover, the Allied side is in a better position to protect pacification gains than it was a year ago. The forces involved in security (RF, PF, Police, Revolutionary Development teams) have increased in numbers and effectiveness. The balance of conventional forces is much more favorable as a result of the heavy Communist losses at Tet and in the following months. Especially since Tet, there has also been a decline in the quality of the Communist guerrillas, a principal instrument for attacking the pacification effort. At present, Communist forces are almost certainly incapable of mounting an offensive on a scale that would permanently reverse overall trends. In selected areas, however, intensified military operations will almost certainly damage the pacification program and set it back; terrorism in particular is likely to increase.

B. Revolutionary Development

11. Engaging the positive support of the peasant for the government is another matter. Many people in the rural areas have been subjected to a series of programs and false starts over the years and, no doubt, are inured to new appeals from Saigon. In any case, the political and psychological attitudes of the hamlet dwellers are not susceptible to statistical measure. There are, however, some general indicators of progress in this phase of pacification. First, there was an impressive turnout of voters in the national elections of 1967; even allowing for some coercion and dishonesty, this suggests that a large part of the rural population is at least partially responsive to the GVN. Second, the rural and urban masses conspicuously failed to rise up and support the VC during the Tet offensive. Finally, there was some popular revulsion to Communist excesses at Tet, and this was reflected in the large number of people

who have since been willing to enlist in the ARVN and in the People's Self-Defense Corps.

12. During 1968, however, new uncertainties have arisen which are bound to have an impact on Revolutionary Development. With the beginning of negotiations and the end of the bombing of North Vietnam, there is a growing belief—at least among informed Vietnamese—that the war is coming to an end, sooner rather than later. Among these people, there is growing apprehension over the shape of a final settlement and the firmness of the American commitment. To the extent that this uncertainty may be reflected in the countryside, it would tend to undermine the gains of Revolutionary Development. Moreover, any weakening of the central government, whether real or imagined, would magnify the uncertainties of officials involved in Revolutionary Development programs and thus pose a growing threat to this aspect of pacification.

13. Even leaving aside such general uncertainties, progress in the field of "nation building" or Revolutionary Development is likely to be painfully slow for several basic reasons. As noted, security is an indispensable prerequisite. In areas where there is a decline in security conditions, even temporarily, the resulting damage to confidence and respect for the government more than offsets gains from developmental projects. Even if security conditions remain good, the administrative capability of Vietnamese officials is weak; Revolutionary Development is heavily dependent on American advice, assistance, and inspiration. Pervasive corruption is a constant threat to the entire system.

C. Neutralizing the Viet Cong Infrastructure

14. Of all the aspects of pacification, the most neglected—and until quite recently the least effective—has been the effort to eliminate the pervasive political infrastructure of the VC. Until mid-1968 the GVN gave no more than lukewarm support to the effort. In part this has been the legacy of a long era of political insecurity, during which intelligence, security, and police activities were often directed against non-Communist groups rather than against the VC. Another reason was the reluctance of the army and other governmental groups, especially the police, to work effectively together. In any case, until 1968 the only organized countereffort were the Chieu Hoi program to rally VC to the government and a small, American-sponsored guerrilla effort, now called Provincial Reconnaissance Units.

15. Because of the presence of large US forces it has become more difficult for the VC infrastructure to operate, and its effectiveness has declined. Eliminating the infrastructure itself, however, is another matter and presents a formidable long term problem. Important steps to remedy the situation were taken in 1968, with the initiation of a countrywide effort, called Phoenix, to collect information on the VC's infrastructure and to plan various operations against it. The record of the new program is fairly promising thus far. Better intelligence, funneled into district and provincial centers, has meant that both conventional and paramilitary operations can be targeted against known VC leaders.

16. The Phoenix program is one additional pressure, and is directed against that part of the system which the VC have long considered crucial. However, it cannot yet be credited with an appreciable countrywide impact on the integrity or general effectiveness of the VC infrastructure. About 13,000 members of the VC infrastructure are claimed to have been killed, captured, or induced to defect. This total may include individuals improperly identified as members of the infrastructure; it certainly includes large numbers of low level cadres who can be replaced fairly easily. The numbers of key cadre eliminated is quite small, since they are the most difficult to find. Moreover, it is not at all clear what happens to those captured. A recent check suggests that a large number are disappearing into the quagmire of the GVN administrative-judicial system and some are probably returning to their former activities. A long, patient effort will be required before the VC infrastructure can be crippled.

III. PROSPECTS

17. Pacification is far too complex, covers too many individual programs, and is geographically too diverse to permit clear prognoses. All things considered, the program as a whole has made a significant contribution to the prosecution of the war and to the political struggle. It has been most successful in expanding the presence of the GVN in the countryside; it has been less successful in establishing permanent security or stimulating genuine loyalty and commitment to the Saigon government. And it has been laggard in coping with the political threat posed by a well-organized and disciplined Communist infrastructure. This has been a significant weakness, threatening and undermining other gains.

A. The GVN and Pacification

18. Much will depend on the attitude of the GVN It cannot be said that the various Saigon governments have shared the American enthusiasm or dedication to pacification. Results obtained during 1966 and 1967 were largely because of constant American pressures. The skills, funds, and motivation have been overwhelmingly American; the GVN has provided manpower and occasional high level endorsements, but has been far from committed to the programs. Too often GVN officials have participated or cooperated simply to please their American counterparts, or to share in the spoils of the inevitable corruption.

19. Saigon now seems to have accepted the need for a vigorous pacification effort. Thieu's preference would probably be to move more deliberately, consolidating GVN control in selected areas rather than establishing a less firmly based presence over a broader range. However, he is increasingly concerned over how much time is left to the GVN before the fighting ends. Fear that peace will come before the GVN is in a strong position to compete with the VC has caused Thieu to support the APC. Moreover, Thieu is taking a new interest in the possibilities of using aspects of the pacification program, such as the People's Self-Defense Corps, as the basis for a countrywide political organization.

20. The GVN still does not have the skills and resources to assume a significantly greater role in the management and execution of an effective pacification effort in 1969. US assistance is still vital to success, but gaining popular acceptance will depend finally on a growing effectiveness of the GVN's performance in the program.

B. Political Conditions

21. A major uncertainty is how much time is left to make up past deficiencies and consolidate current gains. Pacification has already strengthened the GVN position vis-a-vis the Communists. Over the next several months, further progress in pacification will almost certainly not make the GVN much more able to cope with the VC in peacetime than it would be today. A significant advance in this respect would probably require at least a year. And the terms of a settlement could undo virtually all that has been accomplished, especially since progress has been minimal in reducing the political threat.

C. Communist Countereffort

22. A second area of uncertainty is the response of the Communists. We believe the overall situation in Vietnam is such that pacification is less vulnerable to Communist countereffort than in 1967.[1] A principal conclusion about the entire pacification program, however, is that its gains are tentative and can be adversely affected by military setbacks; this is especially true of the gains registered during the APC. It is also true, of course, that Communist military setbacks or reduced levels of operations would facilitate gains in pacification.

23. There are a number of ways the Communists could attack the pacification program. If they are willing to pay the price in casualties and capabilities, they can mount attacks large enough to inflict considerable damage on the pacification effort, at least temporarily. Similarly, they could concentrate their efforts against the pacification security forces (RF, PF, and the Revolutionary Development teams), and increase terrorism and propaganda in the hamlets. The VC launched a concerted propaganda campaign against the APC, almost immediately upon its implementation. The chances are good that they will also attempt to counter the gains in pacification in other ways and they will probably have some success; such an intensification of fighting would, in any case, set back the pacification program. Thus, consolidation of gains is likely to continue to be a very slow and uncertain process.

[1] Mr. Thomas L. Hughes, the Director of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, believes that the estimate does not support the conclusion that the pacification situation is less vulnerable than it was in 1967, but rather that it is essentially as vulnerable now as it was then.