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SOME FINDINGS OF THE VIET CONG MOTIVATION AND MORALE STUDY,
JANUARY-JUNE 1966: A BRIEFING TO THE
JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF (U)

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In late 1964, the VC began to ~~shift from a guerrilla strategy to what they called a "mobile warfare" strategy~~, i.e., a strategy based on the use of large regular units, regiments, or even divisions. This shift, as the VC leadership explained in a high-level COSVN (Central Office of South Vietnam) document issued in March 1966, was in accordance with the "fixed steps" regulating revolutionary warfare. The document stated that guerrilla warfare "can only wear down the enemy little by little," but that ~~total victory was impossible without destroying large elements of the enemy's forces.~~

The shift to a "mobile warfare" strategy occasioned many basic changes in VC policies because, as the captured COSVN document noted, "mobile warfare requires a very large expenditure of human forces, ammunition, food, etc." To meet these requirements, the VC had to resort to forced conscriptions and NVA infiltration, to rely on weapons and ammunition brought from the outside, to increase taxes and the labor draft, and to expand their cadre structure. ~~Initially, the VC justified their "mobile warfare" strategy by expectations of winning major successes or even a final victory in 1965. Their failure to do so has in recent months increasingly forced them, while persisting in their "mobile warfare" strategy, to speak of being prepared to fight a protracted war of several decades.~~

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The ability of the VC and, to a lesser extent, of the NVA to continue the present strategy for a protracted time will depend on many factors including morale, combat capabilities, supplies, and popular support.

The RAND interview program of VC and NVA captives and defectors, jointly sponsored by ISA and ARPA, does not by itself provide sufficient data to evaluate all aspects of the VC and NVA capabilities or even to serve as an accurate measure of how the war is going. The information developed by the approximately 800 in-depth interviews completed to date can, however, shed light on some VC and NVA reactions to developments and problems, which in turn may have a bearing on the ability of the VC to prosecute their "mobile warfare" strategy. My discussion is limited to selected VC problems, based on an analysis of 150 interviews completed since my last presentation in January, that appear to have assumed more significance in the past six months. Roughly half captives, half defectors, the interviewed group was selected to include a high percentage of cadres (45 percent), including officers up to the rank of Main Force battalion commander. Approximately 40 were NVA cadres and rank and file.

Where possible, captured VC documents were used to verify interview statements. In addition, one of our team members has analyzed what we believe to be a fairly representative sample of over 4200 biographical data cards of defectors who had surrendered to the GVN between July 1965 and April 1966.

Salient among the VC problems that we have noted are the effects of intensified combat and large losses on the attitude and behavior of VC and NVA soldiers, recruit-

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ing and replacement difficulties, changes in the attitude and behavior of the cadre, food shortages, defections and desertions, and a marked deterioration in popular support. Some of these have been noted in our earlier reports but have apparently become more pronounced and significant in recent months.

From a military standpoint, the VC "mobile warfare" strategy has not to date been able to overcome the growing GVN/U.S. strength. The COSVN document acknowledged this spring that: "Our [VC] capability to completely annihilate an enemy element is still poor. During the phase conducted this year we failed to dominate the battlefield. . . ." While many interviewees claimed that their units had been frequently victorious in the past, they increasingly mentioned having suffered defeat and heavy losses. According to them, the shift of the initiative to GVN and U.S. forces and the intensification of ground and air operations has further increased the strain on VC and NVA soldiers and frequently disrupted their concentrations, plans, training, food collecting, and other activities. Many interviewees report growing fear of combat, discouragement, malingering, desertions, and defections among the troops. The high rate of sickness, especially among NVA troops in the highlands, which was said to incapacitate 20 to 30 percent of the men in some units at any given time, was reported to cause growing worries and even fear among the soldiers. Other interviewees, however, while admitting to some loss of "fighting spirit" in their units, said that the majority of the soldiers still fought well. Some attributed the tenacious defense put up by VC

and NVA troops, when fighting in prepared positions, to their fear of being driven from their trenches and suffering heavy casualties by being exposed, unprotected to air and artillery attacks.

Recent captured VC documents, many of them high-level papers, express concern over the effects of intensified GVN and U.S. attacks and growing hardships on the troops. They complain that ~~in combat, "the troops are defensive, negative and hesitant," that they show a "lack of self-confidence, fear of sacrifice, combat reluctance, discouragement, sluggishness, . . . desire for peace, exclusive preoccupation with agricultural production due to food shortage . . . [and that] some of the men try to avoid combat [or] desert."~~ The COSVN document also reported that ~~"in some areas the individuals' combat capability has been seriously lowered."~~

Despite these complaints, the available data indicate that ~~VC and NVA discipline and controls, especially among Main Force units, are still largely effective and that their combat capability is still very considerable.~~ By contrast, Local Force and guerrilla soldiers appear less able to bear the growing pressures and difficulties and also have better opportunities than Main Force soldiers to defect or desert home.

Although exposed to growing pressures, the enemy is very skillful at trying to reduce their effectiveness. The VC are very quick at identifying set patterns in GVN and American tactics, operations, movements, attacks or weapon employment and take advantage of them to avoid attacks or to reduce their effectiveness. The VC also

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make good use of their extensive intelligence network and intercepts of GVN and U.S. radio communications to give them warning of attacks or to facilitate their own operations.

To maintain and expand their regular forces in support of the "mobile warfare" strategy, the VC have been ~~forced to draft great numbers of reluctant villagers as~~ well as transfer increasing numbers of Local Force and guerrilla soldiers to Main Force units. Although regular VC units are estimated to have increased in number, recent interviewees report more frequently than before ~~serious~~ and growing problems in recruiting new soldiers and in replacing the large losses. In many instances, units were said to be understrength, sometimes by as much as 30 to 40 percent. For example, an assistant company commander from Zone D told us: "Not only my unit, but almost all other units of the Main Force were short of men. A company is supposed to have 120 men, but the average number of men in a company is now about 80 men." Some NVA interviewees claimed that ~~only 70 percent of their units' losses had been replaced, often by poorly trained VC draftees.~~ The frequent transfer of men from Local Force and guerrilla units to the Main Force tends to keep them understrength and to degrade their combat capabilities. The VC are trying to keep up the strength of their Main Force units even at the cost of weakening other elements of their forces and their control over the population. ~~Among transferred soldiers, many desert or defect because they fear more intensive combat and do not want to leave their home areas.~~ Some captured documents also mention difficulties

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in meeting recruiting quotas and in finding sufficient replacements.

One consequence of the intensive VC draft has been to force the VC to draft some women for service with guerrillas as well as more youths under 17 years of age. Many interviewees reported that the average age of the men in their Main and Local Force units was declining because of difficulties in drafting sufficient men in the prime 18 to 30 age group. ~~VC cadres continued to complain about the poor morale and high rate of desertions among the draftees,~~ and some NVA interviewees claimed that their units found VC replacements to be too poorly motivated and trained to be used in combat. Nevertheless, it is evident that the VC are still able to control and, to some extent, motivate many draftees.

The effectiveness of the VC organization and the quality of the cadres are vital if the VC are to continue in their current level of military effort. At present the ~~VC cadre structure appears to be largely unimpaired, but~~ there are signs of deterioration in the behavior of some elements of the cadre, especially the veterans, and also some weakening in VC controls. The interviews mention shortages of experienced cadres in some VC organizations and units, and growing war weariness, fear of combat, and disillusionment with career prospects among others. Some VC documents also mention shortages of cadres and complain that those with long service in the VC are "demoralized and oversecurity conscious." In some cases, special "health strengthening" allowances were reportedly paid to cadres "due to shortage of personnel and their poor phys-

ical condition." The VC have been promoting younger men with shorter time in the VC to cadre positions. While these are said to be enthusiastic and loyal, both interviews and captured documents indicate that they tend to be inexperienced, become confused by new problems, and frequently make mistakes or antagonize the population. Their promotion tends to be resented by older cadres and veterans.

~~The analysis of defector biographical cards appears to show growing defections among the cadre. Thus the cards for January to April 1966 show that 23 percent of the Main Force defectors and 32 percent of the Local Force defectors were cadres. In the latter case, this represented a 5 percent increase over the last five months of 1965. Among the cadres we interviewed were many Party members with 15 to 20 years of service in the VC. And for this period, 50 percent of the Main Force cadre defectors and 58 percent of those from the Local Force had over three years of service.~~

Although earlier interviewees often complained about the inadequacy of VC food rations, the recent ones indicate that both VC and NVA forces have been plagued by food shortages, especially in the food deficient areas where many of their forces operate. Interviewees mentioned increasing difficulties in food procurement, disruption of supply lines, and some reported reductions in their units' scant rations and pay. The interviewees attributed the deterioration of the VC economic base to: (1) the decline in agricultural output in VC-controlled villages because so many villagers had left for GVN areas or had been

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drafted, while those who remained were discouraged by high taxes and growing insecurity; (2) ~~reductions in food grown~~ by VC units and organizations because of more frequent moves and fighting, and herbicide spray attacks; (3) ~~the destruction of many food storage areas and disruption of the logistic system by GVN/U.S. ground sweeps as well as air and artillery bombardment;~~ (4) ~~the growing shortage of civilian laborers~~ for transporting food and other supplies.

Food deficiencies apparently have a major adverse effect on VC and NVA troop morale and operations. For example the interviewed captive Main Force battalion commander acknowledged that new lower basic rations of 450 grams of rice for units while not in operation "could not fill the stomach." ~~A majority of NVA interviewees com-~~plained ~~that they had been hungry a great deal of the time~~ and said that many had exchanged their spare clothes for food with the Montagnards. An NVA company political officer who infiltrated in March 1966 reported that because of GVN/U.S. operations in the Kontum area, the soldiers temporarily received only 300 grams of rice per day and were forced to steal food from the villagers. ~~The great sensitivity of troops to even small reductions in rations~~ was described by the interviewed battalion commander who said, concerning a reduction of the rice rations by 100-125 grams: "It did affect [the soldiers] a great deal. It was not all right when rations were reduced [from 2.5 cans] to 2 cans of rice. Shortage of food would weaken the fighters' health and thus they could not go on fighting. Their morale would also be affected because they lost confidence in the Front [VC]."

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Interviews and captured documents indicate that food shortages have forced the postponement or curtailment of some VC operations, and that units experiencing difficulties in food supply tend to avoid combat. Aside from the destruction of supply dumps, the data suggest that in many areas the availability of civilian laborers for food transport may be the critical element of the VC logistic system, and potentially a very vulnerable one to GVN and U.S. pressures.

The NVA forces in South Vietnam are increasingly bearing the main burden of fighting U.S. forces. They differ from the VC in that they are not a native force, do not depend to the same extent on the civilian population in the South nor participate in its control, and do not fight for personal gains or benefits but to support a revolution in the South. Furthermore, they are essentially a conventionally trained and organized force with none of the VC's experience in guerrilla warfare.

The NVA interviewees reveal some decline in the quality and training of the more recent infiltrators. Recently infiltrated units have a higher proportion of newly drafted soldiers than earlier ones, some with as little as two months training. The troops appear to receive little jungle warfare training and because of the air attacks on North Vietnam have no training in larger unit operations. The physical and health standards for selection of infiltrators have been considerably lowered so that some of the men sent South are in fact unsuited for combat service.

NVA interviewees increasingly mention that many sol-

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diers did not like being sent South and that some deserted when they learned about their units' assignment. In many cases, 5 to 10 men were said to have deserted from each company in the North, including some cadres and Party members, while others sought to be exempted. The majority, however, felt that they had no choice but to obey their government.

All interviewed NVA soldiers, including those who infiltrated in March of this year, had made the entire trip on foot and had carried all their weapons, including heavy ones, as well as some ammunition. Because of the disruption of rail and truck traffic in the North by U.S. air strikes, the troops spent from 20 to 30 days marching through North Vietnam, mainly at night, before crossing into Laos, thereby prolonging considerably the trip and adding to its hardships. Most reported having suffered on the trip from fatigue, inadequate rations, and a high rate of malaria, so that in many cases the units spent several months recuperating before being sent into combat.

Although many NVA interviewees complained of unexpected hardships, heavy losses, and fear of dying far from home, few seemed to think that they had any choice but to go on fighting. They could not desert home and feared that if they surrendered, they would never be able to return North or that they would be killed by GVN or U.S. forces, as their cadres kept telling them.

Concerning U.S. forces, the interviewees agree that their presence has greatly changed the nature of the war and its intensity and deprived the VC of an early victory. Interviewees who have met U.S. troops in combat were im-

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pressed by their fire power, and some said the soldiers were afraid to fight U.S. troops. The great majority reported that contrary to VC propaganda they had been well treated by U.S. soldiers. Few had heard any information other than from VC or Hanoi sources on U.S. aims in Vietnam, and many appeared to have sincerely believed that the United States intends to colonize Vietnam and to keep its troops permanently there. A number of them reported instances where villagers who had received gifts of food, fertilizer, etc., from Americans had refused to heed VC propaganda about American aggression and that others had been glad to be pacified and secured by U.S. troops. Some complained, however, of the practice of U.S. troops during sweep operations of arresting many villagers as suspects while others blamed the prolongation of the war and the continuing misery of the population on the Americans.

Defections to the GVN and desertions home among VC and NVA troops are important factors in the ability of the VC to fight a protracted war on the present scale. In February 1966, following an extensive psywar campaign and also as a result of intensive GVN and U.S. combat operations, the number of defectors reached an all-time high of over 2200 in February. Thereafter, partly as a result of political unrest, especially in I Corps, the number of defectors declined to about 1300 in June. (Total 8525 defectors for January-June 1966.) The available data indicate, however, that desertions home among VC troops, especially Local Force soldiers, continue to greatly exceed defections. Captured documents also express concern over the inroads made by the GVN defector programs among

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the VC troops and civilians, especially where these were exposed to severe attacks and suffered considerable losses. Tight controls and the isolation of the units in the jungle inhibit defections among Main Force soldiers and NVA troops in the highlands. Defections tend to be higher in the delta areas where the troops come in closer contact with the civilian population and can more easily surrender to GVN civilian authorities.

In 1965 and the first half of 1966, the number of defectors considerably exceeded the number of VC captured. However, defections from VC regular forces are still relatively low (approximately 15 percent, according to the analysis of defector biographical cards) although they seem to have increased somewhat over the past year, especially among the Local Forces. While the defections from Main Force units are as yet too small to have a significant effect on their combat capability, the more numerous defections by Local Force soldiers and guerrillas represent a loss of trained manpower that could have been transferred to the Main Force.

The principal deterrent to defection continues to be fear of mistreatment or death at the hand of the GVN and Americans. The interviewees indicated that little or nothing is known among the VC and NVA troops about the treatment of defectors and captives by U.S. forces.

The VC have always viewed popular support as essential to their operations, growth, and success. Therefore, one of the most significant defeats suffered by the VC has been the increasing loss of this support and the departure of large numbers of villagers from VC to GVN controlled

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areas. Both interviewees and captured documents show that this loss has important adverse effects on VC morale, security, manpower, food resources, and expectations of war outcome. Recent interviews not only increasingly blame recruiting, transport difficulties, and food shortages on declining popular support but more of them tended to see in this one of the main causes of the eventual defeat of the VC.

~~Villagers are not only becoming discouraged by high VC taxes, but the increasing VC labor draft~~ now forces a growing number of them, both men and women, to work for the VC far from home, without pay, and at the great risk to themselves. Declining income in the rural areas and mounting insecurity are often blamed by the villagers on the VC, and the former is a major motive for desertions and defections by VC soldiers. ~~The villagers tend increasingly to lose faith in VC promises, propaganda, and victory and are becoming frightened by VC threats of fighting a protracted war.~~

Since the VC tend to see the progress made in the war not only in terms of military successes but also in terms of gains in population control, the loss of approximately a million refugees constitutes a severe blow to them. As one Local Force assistant company commander and political officer said: "The defectors and refugees have flocked to the towns and have left the VC behind with all the idle land, the empty houses, and problems of manpower shortage." ~~In fact, the refugees constitute not only a severe loss of resources for the VC but also a potential major pacification and psywar gain for the GVN.~~

The VC shift from predicting an early termination of the war to assertions that it could continue for several decades if necessary suggests that the VC have no expectations of winning the war militarily but are hoping that the United States would become weary and discouraged and would eventually give up the struggle and withdraw. However, the threat of a protracted war appears actually to be designed to reassure those who have become depressed by recent VC and NVA reverses and to frighten the United States. It also frightens enemy soldiers who feel that they would not survive such a war. VC persistence in the "mobile warfare" strategy suggests that in fact the VC are not at present organizing for a protracted war but still hope to achieve sufficient military successes to force an early U.S. withdrawal as a consequence of mounting domestic and foreign public pressure on the U.S. Government.

The VC appear to be in a dilemma. The present trends and problems confronting them and their loss of the initiative to U.S. and GVN forces make it increasingly difficult for them to persist in their "mobile warfare" strategy. However, the interviewees and captured documents indicate that so far the VC and Hanoi leaderships do not think that they can or should revert to guerrilla warfare. They appear to fear that the breakup of the large regular units would weaken their combat capabilities and control over their soldiers. This would make them ineffective against the large GVN/U.S. forces, could cause serious demoralization among VC troops and cadres, and allow the GVN to pacify large areas. The interviewed Main Force battalion commander said: " . . . guerrilla warfare can only make

trouble. It could not be used to destroy enemy forces. Thus, I am sure that the Front will never go back to guerrilla warfare. The Front will continue mobile warfare anyway." While the NVA can fight independently of the VC, its efforts would make little sense if the VC movement were to become largely inoperative. Furthermore, the NVA would probably not be suitable for guerrilla warfare, while its withdrawal could cause major discouragement among the VC.

Our survey of recent interviewees shows that the VC face problems which offer opportunities for exploitation. In this connection, we offer the following suggestions:

1. The VC are very operation analysis oriented, as indicated earlier in this briefing. We should, therefore, redouble our efforts to vary the patterns and tactics of air and ground operations, so as to make our attacks still more effective.

2. Further, improvements in radio security seem needed to reduce VC advance knowledge of GVN/U.S. operations and to degrade VC battlefield intelligence.

3. During sweep operations by U.S. troops, efforts should be made to avoid large-scale arrests and especially rearrests of civilians as suspects. Such arrests appear seldom to yield significant captures of VC personnel but do provide the VC with effective anti-American propaganda among the villagers.

4. Programs designed to exploit the VC's dependence on civilian support by increasing the flow of refugees from critical areas should be considered. They could deny the VC important sources of food, manpower, labor

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and revenue, deprive them of porters, and reduce the security of VC bases and units. This could also have a considerable effect on VC morale and on their expectations of victory. However, while the refugees are a major gain for the GVN and potentially could be a great asset, lasting benefits will only accrue if extensive improvements are made in the present refugee program. It would appear desirable that the United States increase its support of and direct active participation in the refugee program.

5. Additional psywar programs are needed to:

(a) ~~Explain the U.S. presence and aims in Vietnam to the rural population and to the VC as well as NVA troops.~~ It would seem desirable to place more stress in GVN and U.S. propaganda on the desire to reestablish peace as soon as possible and on promises to withdraw U.S. forces once the war is ended and South Vietnam's independence is assured.

(b) ~~More efforts are needed to reassure potential VC and NVA defectors about the treatment they will receive by the GVN.~~ In addition to greater specificity in describing the GVN defector program, the appeals should clearly and emphatically spell out the rationale why the GVN would not, in its own interest, wish to mistreat or kill defectors. ~~Potential NVA defectors might be offered a free choice between an immediate return home, repatriation at the end of the war, or assistance in resettling in the South.~~

(c) In view of the considerable evidence that the willingness of cadres to defect is often influenced by career considerations and prospects, more cadres may be

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encouraged to defect if they were offered an opportunity to serve the GVN in cadre positions. In addition, this could help relieve present shortages of cadres in selected and carefully supervised GVN programs.

(d) ~~Psywar programs should be designed to exploit the fear of VC and NVA soldiers of the protracted war which is now being discussed by enemy propagandists.~~ Such programs could stress the implications of such a war for the soldiers and their families and place the major blame for the prolongation of the people's misery on the enemy's leadership.

The evidence in our interviews seems to indicate that the VC's "mobile warfare" strategy contains many and growing contradictory requirements that the VC are finding increasingly difficult to resolve. ~~As their difficulties increase, if they are frustrated in their hopes for an early U.S. withdrawal, the enemy's leadership may come to recognize that it is facing a military as well as political defeat.~~

When this time may come is difficult to predict. To date the effective isolation and control over the armed units, the ^{and} skillful indoctrination of the troops, the ability of VC and NVA units to withdraw from action to recuperate from losses and rebuild their forces, the failure of the GVN and United States to retake and effectively control major areas now held by the VC, and the continued hope that the United States may soon become discouraged or that the GVN may collapse all help to preserve the VC military organization and its combat capability. If the present difficulties continue and become more pronounced,

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however, they may result in a significant weakening of the VC organization and considerably degrade the effectiveness and capabilities of VC and NVA forces. More effective exploitation of the many VC vulnerabilities may help accelerate this process.

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