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SUBJECT: Attitudinal Differences Between Americans and Vietnamese

TO: SEE DISTRIBUTION

1. During the monthly CORDS Advisor Orientation Course, advisors have expressed great interest in the remarks made by Dr. Abraham Hirsch, Chief, Plans and Evaluations Division, ALD, on the attitudinal differences between Americans and Vietnamese.

2. The lecture delivered by D. Hirsch at the Orientation of Intelligence Advisors 18 September 1967, is forwarded for your information. Suggest addressees distribute throughout CORDS, to include each District Advisory Team.

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ATTITUDINAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AMERICANS AND VIETNAMESE*

Attitudes stem from our cultural backgrounds. So American and Vietnamese attitudes differ because our respective cultures differ. We can come up with a generally typical American attitude; the same with the Vietnamese. Vietnamese attitudes fall into the general pattern of the attitudinal systems of most of South and Southeast Asia. These systems have certain characteristics - pluralistic, hedonist and non-martial. This places them in contrast to the attitudes of Western Asia which are monoistic, asthetic and martial. ✓

I will be talking in terms of two sets each of American and Vietnamese attitudes. We all have two sets of attitudes. The "real" attitude is the one which makes us act and think the way we do. We also have a "self-image" attitude which we would like to think we are - our idealized picture of ourselves. There may be a discrepancy between the real and the self-image attitude and this difference is significant. When individuals measure each other or another group against other groups or their own group, they apply their own self-image. We do not compare the Vietnamese with what Americans are really like but what their idealized picture of themselves is - and vice versa. The difference between the two attitudes is the measurement of cultural change. In time today's real attitudes likely will become part of the self-image but it will take time - five, ten centuries, a millenium. This is a way of measuring the change which has occurred and also how quickly a culture is capable of changing.

The lecture is divided into various headings. The first one I will discuss is The Total Value System.

American

Attitude

Fairly rigid value system,
now changing

Self-Image

Non-traditional, non-conformist

Vietnamese

Attitude

Fairly rigid and formal
traditional system now
beginning to change

Self-Image

Traditional

Hirsch, Abraham, Ph.D., Lecture Delivered at Orientation of Intelligence Advisors, September 18, 1967, Saigon. Dr. Hirsch is Chief of the Plans and Evaluations Division, AID.

Inclosure 1

Americans think of themselves as being non-traditional and non-conformist, as a new departure different from their European background, stressing the freedom and right of each individual to think and act according to his wishes within the restrictions imposed by the common good. Americans see Europeans and other peoples as carrying attitudinal debris accumulated over the centuries. In reality, our value system is fairly rigid though it is now beginning to change. Americans are actually conformist to a greater degree than many Western Europeans. We are conformists--we expect men to avoid deviations from what we consider the norm. And we apply this conformism to many situations.

// The Vietnamese real attitude is fairly similar to our own real attitude. Essentially the meaning of the words are the same--with one important exception. The Vietnamese value system has this element of formality which is lacking in our own. The Vietnamese, like all Southeast Asians, are formal, protocol-minded, stressing how they do things more in fact than what they do. This element of formality is lacking in American cultural behavior pattern. The Vietnamese have a certain reserve which Americans sometimes associate with the British. The Vietnamese stress this reserve as part of social protocol. You should be mindful of this because the Vietnamese judge in terms of this measurement. The Vietnamese self-image about their value system is very close to their real attitude in terms of their value system. The Vietnamese are tradition-minded, stress and cherish their traditions for the traditions' sake. It is difficult for Americans to understand that these people can cherish their traditions like we cherish our flag. But it is the thing which has made the Vietnamese able to survive against very great odds as an ethnic people--respect of tradition for its own sake. One of the things which they cannot understand and which they criticize about Americans is the fact that Americans do not understand tradition and its importance and value. Americans represent themselves in terms of our American self-image; we tell the Vietnamese that Americans are people for whom tradition doesn't matter. In addition, there is the factor that nearly all Americans with whom Vietnamese come in contact are Americans assigned to Vietnam to do a job which calls for them to tamper with Vietnamese traditions in some functional area, e.g., gathering intelligence. We are here to create change, to change habits. This aggravates the Vietnamese picture of Americans as people who do not understand the value of their traditional culture, people who come to damage Vietnamese traditions. In addition, the Vietnamese see us as people who lack tradition, a people who have a very short history (a very minor portion of Vietnamese history). Americans are conceived of as lacking a culture of their own--they speak a language borrowed from England, their literature is borrowed and many Americans do not know enough about American culture to convince the Vietnamese that we do have such a culture of our own.

Weltansicht
(View of the World)

AmericanVietnameseAttitudeAttitude

Monistic
Polarizing
Action-oriented

Pluralistic
"Middle Path"
Harmony-oriented

Self-ImageSelf-Image

Tolerant
Receptive to new ideas

Very loyal to tradition

Americans are monists (which comes from the Greek word for "one"). A monist is someone who, out of every set of alternatives or truths, selects one and rejects all the others; he selects one as being good and all others as being bad, though perhaps in varying degrees of badness. This is true in matters of importance and the ridiculous. Americans believe that a man is born into a religious denomination and we expect him to be, let us say a Lutheran, and remain so for the rest of his life. We see something wrong with someone who dabbles in all religions. The same thing is true of politics.

Americans give a monistic attachment to all sets of alternatives from things of importance to the ridiculous. This kind of attitude contrasts with the Vietnamese attitude of pluralism. A pluralist is a man who out of a set of alternatives or truths selects one but doesn't necessarily reject any or all of the others. He selects one because from a practical point of view it isn't possible to select more than one; it isn't possible simultaneously to consider two different kinds of religions (you can only go to one service at a time) or politics. There is no implication of disloyalty, no implication that having selected the one, you have to reject all others. A Vietnamese may consider himself nominally to be a Buddhist. This doesn't prevent him from participating in Catholic services when he wants to. There is no premium on rejecting all alternate choices; there is every inclination to participate in as many things as possible, to share, to dole elements of your loyalty to a whole set of things, rather than to a monistically chosen one. This Vietnamese pluralism is not only applied to matters of importance but permeates their whole range of experience. There is no "polarization" as in the American attitude.

Americans polarize things into good and bad. The alternative which we have selected is "good" and the rejected alternatives are bad. This is how we polarize life; we structure life as a struggle between good (our selected good) and bad. We view good and bad as sharply polarized, as extremes. In the American view of life good and bad are headed for a clash, a great Armageddon, and it is our optimistic view of life that out of this great Armageddon good inevitably triumphs. But Americans are realistic--a small amount of evil does manage to survive this Armageddon. There ensues a new process of polarization and there will be still another Armageddon. Continue this chart and this process will repeat itself into infinity in a sequence of polarizations and Armageddons. This polarization of life leads to an action-orientation. If you structure life as a series of Armageddons to be fought on the behalf of your selected good against what you have rejected as evil, it leads you to prepare for the Armageddon by martialing your forces and waging that Armageddon in terms of action. Americans structure their lives in terms of actions to be fought all the time on behalf of what they consider to be good. Americans are action-oriented in every minutiae of life. It has reached the point where we even assert it in our leisure time.

The Vietnamese view of life is pluralistic. A pluralist does not see life as a confrontation between good and bad. Pluralists do recognize that there is good and evil in the world but the way they see it, it looks like this (chart). Good and evil coexist in the world in balanced amounts. Good and evil are essentially in harmony. There is no Armageddon. Good and evil coexist together between two extreme points; they form the middle path of life in which most people live and in which the man who has mastered the game of life, this is where he lives. There is this valley of the main stream of life where good and bad coexist. There are two mountains on either side of this valley; there is a mountain of goodness and a mountain of evil. If a man wants to be truly good, to become unsoiled by any taint of evil, he must withdraw from the stream of life and remove himself from the valley of the main stream of life and spend his life on the mountain of goodness. If a man wants to be truly evil he must leave the valley of the main stream of life and remove himself onto the mountain of evil. In the valley where most people practice the harmony game you struggle and survive. But there are important details.

In reality the valley does not have good and evil neatly aligned; in the valley, the valley is frightening territory. There are little patches of good and evil right next to each other. As people in the valley look about them, they know they must move cautiously; perhaps not always in a straight line toward their objective because if they do so, inevitably there will be spots of evil which will hurt them. Never do you charge straight ahead in the valley. The wise man stands, probes, is willing to wait because in this valley there is a heavy fog which can descend on you and if you are in that fog you had better not move at all until you know what lies around you. The wise man waits, is patient until the fog is lifted. Good and evil coexist.

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almost in equal amounts in the valley. But the pendulum swings back and forth, good and evil succeed each other cyclically and any human interference creates a risk of disrupting this cycle and creating disharmony, of upsetting the natural balance. The harmony game places no premium on human interference through quick action; it is quite unlike the Armageddon game.

The action, the Armageddon line, and the harmony line are very different. This creates problems. One of the greatest frustrations which Americans feel toward a Vietnamese colleague is his not playing the action game. There are certain important operational attitudes connected with this. If you are action-oriented, there is a risk in letting evil get a good start, any start. But in the harmony pattern the pendulum will swing and will redress the balance and inevitably harmony will come to the fore. The action-oriented game stresses action; the harmony attitudinal pattern discourages action. However, it allows the individual sometimes to do something. But what he is permitted to do is not to take action but to take something like semi-actions. Semi-actions are not actions. An action is something taken toward a goal. A semi-action is a lateral move that is usually brought to bear against the background of the situation rather than against the focal point of a situation, a move which involves intermediary persons or things. Americans consider these semi-actions as futile and deceitful and immoral. The American is careful to fight clean. In the game of semi-actions methodology is not terribly important. Semi-actions soften up the process brought to bear against the background of the situation.

There is another implication. We action-oriented Americans have definite rules of warfare appropriate to fighting of any Armageddon. They are structured on a scale of degrees of violence, e. g. in an Armageddon fight in the office you do not use violence (physical). We have rules of warfare and morality which apply to each intensity level of the Armageddon. In the valley there is only one rule--the rule of the harmony game. When the rule of harmony is discarded there are no other rules. If the rules of the harmony game are discarded anything goes, any violence is permissible since the system has been destroyed, since already there has been a rejection of the overall law which prevails in the valley. This accounts for something Americans question in Vietnam. How come this gentle and harmony-oriented people can be violence-oriented? Once the rules of the game are rejected, there are no other rules.

There is another point about the valley. Our saints and heroes are in the thick of Armageddon leading us on fighting for what we believe. In the valley the saints are outside of the valley, are removed to the mountain. They sometimes manipulate from that distance but most of the time they are removed from the valley. The valley doesn't consist of either saints or sinners but of people who have learned to manipulate good and evil and who survive by this manipulation.

Our real attitudes and self-image attitudes conflict with each other. The Vietnamese self-image stresses their loyalty to traditions which give them this harmony-oriented non-Armageddon view of life.

APPROACH TO PROBLEMS

American

Attitude

Analytical (M+A+N=MAN)
(What makes it tick?)

Vietnamese

Attitude

Conceptual
(Nguoi = Man)
(What's the idea?)

The American approach to a problem is analytical. We label each piece of the problem good or bad according to our measurements and thus gain a comprehensive picture of the problem, a picture which is polarized as a result of this analysis. Our approach to problems is analytical. In order to get to the problem as a whole we must add up all the pieces and come up with a concept. Getting to a concept is the end result of this analysis process which involves labelling and polarizing the pieces. In a sense we are always asking what makes it tick? But after taking the problem apart we may not always know how to put it back together again.

The Vietnamese approach to a problem is conceptual where this symbol 人 means man; they accept the concept that this means man. There is no analysis. This conceptual approach externalizes the problem; it takes the problem and relates it to other concepts outside the situation.

DECISION-MAKING

American

Attitude

✓ "Realistic" decisions made by analyzing facts and drawing "logical" conclusions within the framework of the value system

Self-Image

A blend of idealism and realism, suspicion of opportunism

Vietnamese

Attitude

✓ Pragmatic-decisions made on basis of practical results. A certain amount of opportunism seen as permissible if desirable, harmonization of interests ("face")

Self-Image

Idealistic-nonmaterialistic Traditions based on traditional considerations, considering various factors or interests and harmonizing them.

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Americans view analysis as preliminary to making a decision. The Vietnamese may not do anything. American decision-making begins with analysis, goes through a series of conclusions (considerations) followed by an action which is an Armageddon in which good triumphs over evil. The Vietnamese sequence is quite different. The decision-making process starts at the end and goes backward. The Vietnamese start out with what they would like to end up with and then work backward, considering what is necessary to arrive at what you want. And their concept of what they want to attain is a harmony-orientation not an Armageddon but a situation in which harmony has been restored, the natural law redressed, in which good and evil coexist. They therefore take a pragmatic view in decision-making. They decide on the basis of practical considerations what they want to achieve and a certain amount of opportunism is permissible if it leads to the desired results. What counts more than anything else is the harmonization of interests, making everybody reasonably happy, but no one totally happy or unhappy. Because if this occurs you get the seeds of further inharmony. This harmonization of interests is also the result of maintaining "face" which is very important. One of the many reasons why you can't wipe your enemy off the board is that it would create disharmony. Your decision must take the other guy's "face" into account. Whenever an action of one individual is seen by another individual as arrogant, overly aggressive the recipient loses face. But this is only one aspect of it. The man who has created the situation also loses face as a boor. And his family and friends also lose face because by his action they do not know how to behave with each of the individuals involved. When loss of face occurs there is a period of awkwardness during which it is difficult to coexist and achieve anything. The Vietnamese think of themselves as non-materialistic whereas they are very materialistic; money is used as the rubric which helps to re-establish harmony. They think of themselves as acting on the basis of traditional considerations but in fact they are very materialistic.

ATTITUDE TO LEADERSHIP

Americans have institutionalized leadership. We place power in any organization into an institution. We view power as something by itself and the individual incumbents move in and out of these power "boxes", i. e., loyalty is to the

American Attitude

Institutionalization of leadership
Cynicism to leadership but willing to follow

Self-Image

Critical loyalty

Vietnamese Attitude

Personal commitment to leaders

Self-Image

Loyal to leaders
Reflecting traditional values

office of President not to the incumbent necessarily. We give our holders of power a dual personality. It is only when a guy like you and me moves into that box that as the leader he gets our loyalty. We are often cynical about our leaders but we are loyal; we feel free to criticize them in terms which are relatively unrelated to the formal institutional aspects of leadership. We recognize the need for this because we need leaders at Armageddon.

A Vietnamese, at least until elections two weeks ago, would have said his leader was Ky. This is a government not of laws but of men. It is the man who counts, the man as a total unit. This dichotomy of official and personal actions doesn't exist. A man is a man, as a man he holds power, he does things in his own interests and also for the general interest. What we would call the public interest doesn't exist separately. It is accepted that province chief will use his power for the family as well as the common good but he will harmonize the private and general interest. It is understood that he will not steal everything to benefit his family thus leaving nothing for, e.g. roadbuilding. But power would be no fun at all if you weren't able to do something for yourself. There is a personal commitment to leadership which sees the leader in terms of the father figure. This has implications two ways: The follower has to do things for the leader but the leader must also do things for his followers; and if he doesn't do this, he is expendable. In this concept of leadership the Vietnamese self-image is that of a people who reflect traditional values. There are certain traditional values for leadership--cultured, education, good breeding, fairly high social origin. This is a problem in the present political context in Vietnam.

SELF AND OTHERS

The way in which the individual sees himself in relation to the group. I have already said Americans are conformist and they are status-group minded.

American Attitude

Conforms to status group
Sense of community highly developed

Self-Image

Ruggedly individualistic

Vietnamese Attitude

Conforms to the kin group
or village
Limited sense of community

Self-Image

Family above all else

In this American conformism family plays only a very small role. The American ideal is not to grow up like Daddy. The family is a measurement of progress away from its origin. We respect the move away from the family background. It is hard to see just what the family in America today is relevant to. Americans have a sense of community not to the kin group but

to the group aligned with us in Armageddon. This is our American pattern in terms of individuals and others.

This is radically different in Vietnam. The Vietnamese are conformist but they conform to the kin group and the extended family. Whereas our typical family consists of mother, father and children, the Vietnamese family includes the nuclear family plus all the uncles, cousins which Americans discard or forget. The Vietnamese family also includes parents, grandparents, even though dead. In this context dead members of the family are not quite as dead as they are in America. Dear Uncle Chou is still part of the family. The family is the basic socio-biological organism to which the individual belongs, the only element of permanency in a fluid society on which the individual can count, the only unit which has a real claim on him and on which he has a real claim. For most Vietnamese the village is where the living family lives and where the dead relatives are buried. It is therefore the hamlet to which loyalty is given because that is where the family is. There is a limited sense of community. There are no Armageddons for which to form groups. The family is the group through which and in which the individual strives. [To us striving for the family may seem very selfish motive because it is not in the community interest.] In the self-image, the family is above self. The individual exists only in the context of the family. While we Americans may criticize a province chief for being corrupt, the Vietnamese would consider the chief unresponsive to the needs of his family which has a prior claim. The guy who cheats his family by giving it to his non-family responsibilities is considered immoral.
