FOREIGN SERVICE INSTITUTE

June 4, 1971

Mr. Nathaniel Adams
Readers Digest
1730 Rhode Island Avenue, N.W.
Washington, D.C.

Dear Nat:

I enclose copy of remarks by the former Indonesian Ambassador to Hanoi which includes his name in case anyone would ever wish to contact him.

I enclose for your personal interest a brief and by no means fully finalized paper I wrote recently about our Viet-Nam involvement. You might find it interesting.

Best regards.

Sincerely,

Ogden Williams
Coordinator
Viet-Nam Training Center

Enclosures
1- Amb of Hanoi Interview
2- "Toward Understanding and Learning..."

O/FSI/VTC:OWilliams:d

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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

June 1, 1971

Ogden:

Here is an FBIS account of the interview with the Indonesian Ambassador. It is not as hard-hitting as some articles that appeared in some Asian newspapers. (Ithink the Press Summary that I saw was from the Philippine Free Press.)

I'll continue to look for the actual article I made reference to. I think I have it at home.

Don Brenneke

FORMER AMBASSADOR TO HANOI SEES NO END IN SIGHT FOR VIETNAM WAR

[Interview with Former Indonesian Ambassador to Hanoi Nugroho by Rb. Sugiantoro; Djakarta, Kompas, Indonesian, 13 January 1971, pp 3, 6]

Editor's Note: The Vietnam War continues, but few Indonesians have seen the situation in North Vietnam at close hand. Among them are Nugroho S.H. (sardjana hukum; law degree), a former Indonesian Ambassador in Hanoi (1967-70). He returned to Djakarta in March 1970 at his own request at the end of his assignment. Now he is requesting early retirement from the Foreign Affairs Department because he wants to be active in the development and law fields as a corporation lawyer. He now heads a legal consultant firm which provides legal advice on foreign capital investment, banking, mining, etc. Nugroho was born in 1920 in Modjokarto and graduated from Leiden University. He was active in the diplomatic field for more than 20 years and is now considered one of the best Indonesian diplomats. Following is the story of his sojourn in Hanoi.

U.S. Concessions

The Vietnam War cannot possibly be settled as long as the two sides involved do not mutually make more direct concessions. Up to the present time, the allies, especially the United States, have made more concessions than their opponents. For instance, by halting the bombing of North Vietnam, being willing to discuss with the Viet Cong, and making preparations to withdraw a portion of its troops.

The only concession Hanoi has made up to now is to be prepared to discuss only "one table" with the Saigon side in Paris. Nothing else. So stated the former Republic of Indonesia Ambassador to North Vietnam, Nugroho S.H., in talking with Kompas recently. He was assigned to North Vietnam from August 1967 to March 1970 and now is awaiting retirement from the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Nugroho S.H. does not see that Hanoi is inclined to make any concessions other than the one mentioned above, at least in the short run. "I did not see any change in the North Vietnamese attitude from the beginning of the Paris Conference to last March ... and none after that time either."

A "give and take" attitude on the part of both sides is needed for settlement. At present, the interests of both sides are far from being reconciled. If it is dragged on endlessly, a settlement satisfactory to both sides will never be achieved.

Situation in Hanoi

Nugroho arrived in Hanoi while the U.S. was still terrorizing North Vietnam with its bombing. Every day, wave after wave of U.S. aircraft dropped bombs on important targets all over that country, including the capital.

Hanoi is a city of about 600,000 inhabitants, so it is about as big as Semarang. Most of the buildings or houses are two-storied. They were built during the French colonial era. Wide parks with small lakes are found in several parts of the city.

According to Nugroho, since the U.S. began attacking Hanoi, it became an ill-kept city where ordinarily it had been rather orderly. Buildings appeared gloomy, neglected. Grass grew wild in the gardens. Office buildings, which of course are simple, appeared to be in bad shape, with mildewed walls. "Who has a chance to clean up his house any more when at any moment one must be prepared to run to the shelter," was the common saying.

This situation was not improved by the aspect of the portions of the city which were completely destroyed. These were usually important objectives and their surrounding areas which later were closed to the public.

The only buildings which were kept up apparently were several foreign missions, hotels and two large restaurants. Actually, the targets of U.S. attack in Hanoi were electric power stations, water pumping stations, several small airfields in the outskirts of the city and the Long Bien bridge.

This bridge, more than two kilometers long, crosses the Red River and is located only two kilometers from the Indonesian Embassy. This bridge always was the U.S. pilots' target. It was hit several times by U.S. bombs, but it was also reconstructed several times by Vietnamese workers. Several rockets aimed at important targets went far from their mark. One hundred and fifty of them exploded only seven meters from the Indonesian Embassy.

But former Indonesian Ambassador Nugroho felt that U.S. air attacks on Hanoi really were not as diabolical as they were accused of being. The deviation of bombs or rockets from their targets, for the most part, was not deliberate. The main reason for such deviation was the high speed of the attacking jets which were principally Phantom fighter bombers. So if the pilot delayed pressing the button for just a second, the rocket would be launched far from its target. This happened frequently. In addition, the tight air defenses of the city often caused the attacking aircraft to disperse and to lose their original targets.

Hearty Laughter

Further, Nugroho related that in addition to the shabby appearance of Hanoi, another war situation which could not be hidden was that of the inhabitants. Almost all Vietnamese in the capital of Hanoi were visibly depressed. "During the bombing of Hanoi, I never heard a person laugh heartily. All felt suppressed. Rather like the depressed atmosphere of Jogja residents during the war of independence."

They also were thin. Their food was rationed. Not much food, but enough. This rationing system was still operative when he left Hanoi last year.

Parties or gatherings of large groups in one place were forbidden, mainly to prevent many casualties if there were U.S. air attacks. Shops were open only from 0400 to 0730. After that time, they were closed. Open markets were spread among the city's lanes.

Warning System and Policy of Dispersion

Each time U.S. aircraft "stopped" in Hanoi, there were casualties and losses. However, there were relatively few casualties. According to the Indonesian diplomat, this was due to the good warning system and policy of disperson. He was impressed by this.

The system consisted of an air warning signal. Every wave of U.S. aircraft 70 miles from Hanoi was picked up on radar. The warning was relayed quickly via a public radio attached at all street corners of the city. It resounded with "enemy aircraft 70 kilometers . . . 60 kilometers . . . 50 kilometers . . ." and upon hearing "30 kilometers," Hanoi residents hid in the shelter holes. These holes were prepared at every house and sidewalk and were called foxholes.

The holes made at the sides of the streets were one-man holes. When not in use, they were covered with a special cover, and another person ran to the shelter when the enemy aircraft warning announced aircraft at 30 kilometers from Hanoi. Before reaching this distance, there was a possibility that the aircraft would turn to another target city. Even though the people became accustomed to this method, the interruptions by the aircraft nevertheless affected them mentally.

According to Nugroho, "Try to think how it would be if every day, sometimes nine or ten times, you had to run for shelter without knowing when that would be. Sometimes in the morning, in the midst of your work. Not infrequently in the middle of the night when you are sound asleep..." And one must run as fast as possible to the shelter for, of course, the rockets or bombs have no eyes.

The policy of dispersion or spreading out decreases losses, both of goods and lives. Through this method, all crowded areas such as markets,

are dispersed throughout the city. All are dispersed, withdrawn to the roadsides outside the city and covered with canvas. So also with people. Old people and school children have been evacuated. Foreigners may not e Hanoi readily. "Even my family could not stay with me."

Suspicious of Foreigners

During the war, North Vietnam was very suspicious of strangers. F instance, people could not mix with foreigners, moreover, those who come from other Communist countries. All must have a permit. This differs fr the custom in Djakarta, where, for instance, a foreign embassy wishing to hold a party or reception is permitted to invite whom they please. In Hanoi, no.

Invitations from a foreign embassy must be forwarded to the North Vietnamese Department of Foreign Affairs in advance. The Department indi cates who may be invited. The same is true if a Vietnamese is to be em- ployed, for instance, as local staff or officials or servants of the emb The North Vietnamese Foreign Affairs Department also will appoint candid for such work. "And, of course, we know who they appoint. It is a fact that they are not just ordinary officials or servants," Nugroho said laughingly.

With Communist China and Russia

When questioned as to the actual relations between the CPR and th Soviet Union, Nugroho answered that, in general, North Vietnam could be to have a free attitude. It was independent, not siding with one or th other of the main bodies of world communism. But he feels that the oth side of the coin actually is that Hanoi wants to take advantage of the Soviet conflict. Or, in other words, it wants to play both in order to continue to get their aid.

Nevertheless, it is clear that most Hanoi authorities are inclin toward Moscow rather than toward Peking. This is the general opinion a other Hanoi diplomats. According to Nugroho, he saw this personally wh Peking was busy launching the Cultural Revolution. Almost no Democrati Republic of Vietnam authorities supported it publicly. They considered Cultural Revolution only as a "Chinese matter" and not as a Communist lem. The people of Hanoi usually felt the same way.

It should be remembered that Vietnam was dominated by China for than 1,000 years and after that was often troubled by China up to the of the Chiang Kai-shek regime. "They were suspicious of the Chinese e through both nations are Communist now."

Nevertheless, it is clear that Hanoi cannot afford to take an a nistic or critical attitude toward Communist China because of its dep upon China now. This dependence not only involves food and light wea

which are supplied by Peking but heavy weapons which come from the Soviet Union and other East European countries. The greater part of this aid must come via Communist China since the port of Haiphong cannot receive it.

More Than Krushchev's Russia

Nugroho further explained that up to the present, the North Vietnamese attitude has been a firmly doctrinaire Communist attitude. Among other things, it is evident in the hardline foreign policy being carried out at the Paris Conference. The suspicious attitude toward foreigners is also proof.

Based on his close-hand experience in North Vietnam, former Ambassador Nugroho defined the North Vietnamese attitude as "more doctrinaire than Krushchev's Russia" -- more inclined toward Stalin but not in the direction of Mao. It should be borne in mind that North Vietnam was one of the first nations to agree with and support the Soviet action against Czechoslovakia in August 1968.

Also this harsh attitude was evident after the U.S. stopped bombing North Vietnam. They benefitted by continuing to build their economic strength and defenses for achieving the ideal of winning the war. According to Nugroho, it is hard to believe that the end of the Vietnam War is in sight.

Speaking to North Vietnamese relations with Indonesia, former Indonesian Ambassador Nugroho stated that relations had not been close earlier; they were cold but not inimical.

Finally, when asked what were the prospects for concrete changes, Nugroho S.H. stated, "I cannot predict because up to the present, many world predictions on the Vietnam situation have proven wrong..."

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Toward Understanding and Learning from the Viet-Nam Experience

1950 - 1971

Although the Viet-Nam experience is not yet over, already the questions are being raised: What did it all mean? What, if anything, have we learned from it? Could we do it better if something like it happened again? People are sick and tired of "counterinsurgency," and yet it is most important that this traumatic experience not remain as an unsolved issue in our national experience, but rather something that we understand and can use to contribute to our national maturity and wisdom.

Having been associated with the Viet-Nam problem at least since 1956, I will attempt to present a sort of global overview as a possible contribution to such understanding. Deliberately this presentation will concentrate on the woods, not the trees. Its insights, such as they are, were derived over a period of years during which no diary of day-to-day events was kept — indeed it would have been contrary to the rules to do so. I feel that it is useful, in view of my purpose, not to clutter up the narrative with minutely researched details and "proofs." There have always been "facts" galore regarding Viet-Nam, and by judicious — or perhaps unscrupulous — selection of facts one could always justify virtually any preconceived notion. What has been less easy to construct are perspectives and judgments, and these will be the focus of this paper. If long association with a problem has any value, it should be to enable the observer to form such judgments and develop such

perspectives, and from these arise understanding and a sense of lessons learned in the past which could make some contribution to the future. I think it is vitally important that our Viet-Nam experience be understood and digested, and not be relegated by time to our national subconscious as a mass of unresolved conflicts and anxieties.

To tell a story in its broad outline, one must begin at the beginning.

The Rationale of our Initial Involvement

After World War II, the United States initially hastened to demobilize its armed forces and return to "normalcy." The Russians did not. The Red Army imposed Communist rule directly or indirectly on the formerly independent nations of Eastern Europe, while some internal dislocations rendered such western states as Italy and France vulnerable to Communist expansionism. This expansionism was not a theoretical thing, an illusion invented by "cold warriors," but as real as tanks and guns and imposed dictatorship.

Faced with this situation, the United States became reluctantly aware that it, alone among the democracies, was capable of mounting a vigorous resistance to the threat. Nations are motivated in their foreign policies by a combination of national interest and national ideals. It can be argued that both considerations required the United States, as a matter of virtual historical necessity, to construct a

policy of resistance to Communist expansion in the post-war era known as the Cold War.

Our national purpose — about which there was then virtually no dissent — led to the Marshall Plan which enabled Western Europe to recover its traditional viability. The Truman Plan thwarted Communist expansion in Greece and Azerbaijan, and when the expanding totalitarian forces of the time made their most blatant aggression in Korea, we acted to thwart this move as well. There is today little debate about the wisdom and value of these American commitments of the past. For one thing they worked, and the commitments were liquidated successfully within a reasonably short time frame by the same leadership that made them.

The important first thing to note about our Viet-Nam experience is that our initial involvement was done for the same purposes and contemporaneously with our other commitments noted above. From 1945-50, we had deplored and opposed the French attempt to reimpose colonial rule in Viet-Nam, and rightly so. In 1949 the Chinese Communists emerged supreme in China, and opened supply lines to the Communist-led independence movement in Viet-Nam. Our Viet-Nam involvement really began in 1950, when on balance we concluded that the necessity to resist Communist expansionism — as elsewhere in the world — outweighed in importance the also desirable objective of thwarting French colonialism, and the decision to intervene with material and financial assistance was

made.*/ This decision was encompassed with frustrations from the outset because we knew our aid had to be funneled through the French regime, even though it was intended to help the non-Communist Vietnamese. Thus in 1954, when the French were defeated, Americans who were involved with Viet-Nam breathed a sigh of relief. Now we could pursue an integrated, positive and constructive policy of helping the South Vietnamese to defend themselves against Communist expansionism, without incidentally shoring up the bastions of French colonialism of which we disapproved.

Original Miscalculations on Viet-Nam

Whereas the recipients of our Marshall Plan assistance in Western Europe had inherently viable societies which could profit from and build upon our aid, such was sadly not the case in Viet-Nam. To be sure, there were authentic nationalist elements in the non-Communist ranks. Indeed many Vietnamese felt passionately that Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh had stolen the revolution and the independence movement from their rightful owners. Ho Chi Minh was not even in Viet-Nam between World War I and World War II, when the patriots of Yen Bay were dying on French guillotines, and the sacrifices of the independence movement prior to the end of World War II were in fact made predominantly by non-Communist Vietnamese nationalists. When Ho Chi Minh came to power — with U.S. and

*/ The view has also been advanced that the sole reason for U.S. assistance in Viet-Nam in 1950 was to induce French cooperation in NATO. I assume that both considerations were involved.

Nationalist Chinese assistance — in 1946, he first settled accounts with these nationalist groups by wholesale liquidation of their leaders, and captured the independence movement from those who had carried its banners and died for its cause in the years between the wars.

Unfortunately, the non-Communist Vietnamese left behind in the wake of the French departure were far less viable than we thought them to be. There were a variety of religio-political sects such as the Cao Dai and Hoa Hao. There were political parties such as the VNQDD and Dai Viets, often splintered into a bewildering array of sub-groups. These parties — quite apart from lack of unity between them — were crippled from within. For one thing, they had lost their only platform when independence was achieved — since they had had no program except to get rid of the French. For another, their tactics and organization had of necessity been clandestine, and they had no experience of overt political action. (These two characteristics of Vietnamese political parties survive like conditioned reflexes to this day. The instinctive "patriotic" reflex is to oppose whatever government is in power — even though it is now a Vietnamese government, not French, and there also remains the striking absence of well-articulated positive programs or ideological content in the non-Communist Vietnamese political groupings.)

Another inherent Vietnamese weakness was that the nationalist group included not only authentic Vietnamese patriots and independence

fighters, but also elements who had fully committed themselves to the French whether from conviction or from opportunism. These elements included the Saigon bourgeoisie, much of the officer class of the Vietnamese army, the absentee landlords, and the civil servants educated in French schools. Even when these people were decent, upright and reasonable individuals, they were tainted with the colonial association, and remain so to this day.

In a word, then, the original American miscalculation was to assume that the non-Communist Vietnamese were more viable than in fact they were. For this reason primarily, our initiatives did not meet with the resounding success achieved so rapidly in Western Europe, and our commitments could not be liquidated within a reasonable time frame and by the same leaders who made the commitments. As time went by, a whole new generation was called upon to cash checks drawn by their predecessors for reasons clear at the outset but largely lost sight of in the passage of the years.

A second fundamental miscalculation was to overestimate our American ability to influence the internal affairs of another country — of which more later.

The Nature of the Problem in Viet-Nam

The basic problem confronting the U.S. (and the South Vietnamese) in 1954, as in 1971 for that matter, was the politico-administrative vacuum left behind in the wake of the French departure. In this

context, Ho Chi Minh and the Viet Minh were not the enemy, they were only the "competition." The enemy was the vacuum, and the question was who would fill it. Insurgencies occur in vacuum situations. Where there is no vacuum, the insurgency does not arise, and where an insurgency does arise, it is overcome by filling the vacuum.

On Ho Chi Minh's side there was a single nation-wide organization having continuity back to 1930, an abundance of trained cadre and an accepted doctrinal foundation. This powerful structure was backed by an experienced international movement operating from geographically contiguous bases. On "our" side in Viet-Nam, there was nothing but a collection of problems, people and good intentions backed by the power of the United States operating from half way around the world. In retrospect, one can wonder that we have done as well as we have, even admitting that we have made enormous and avoidable mistakes.

It is, I believe, easy to demonstrate the correctness of the insight that the politico-administrative vacuum has been the essential problem in Viet-Nam from the outset, and I interject this demonstration here before continuing with the historical story of our Viet-Nam experience. In the southern delta area of Viet-Nam is An Giang Province. It is a rich area having a population of some half million. Its significance is that An Giang has enjoyed non-Communist peace for years, precisely because the politico-administrative vacuum so typical of most of Viet-Nam after 1954 does not exist there. By historical

accident, this area is the seat of the Hoa Hao, a religio-political grouping which, like the Communists, has continuity, cadre and a doctrinal base. The Hoa Hao have preempted the area, established their own structure and, in a word, "filled the vacuum." All else flows from this. The Communists cannot organize an insurgency in An Giang. Their only option would be to overrun the province by conventional force — which is the type of threat that we and the Vietnamese can most readily cope with. An Giang is what "victory" looks like in South Viet-Nam, which I define as non-Communist peace, and the problem elsewhere in Viet-Nam has essentially been the general absence of the vacuum-filling factors — political, administrative, doctrinal and economic — which obtain in An Giang.

To return to the main theme, President Ngo dinh Diem made the first attempt to fill the vacuum in South Viet-Nam. He attempted to do so in the same manner as the Communists, by creating a centralized structure from the top down. He promulgated a confusing doctrinal base known as "personalism" and began to train cadre and to establish an administrative structure, but he failed because the task he attempted could not be completed within the time frame available to him in the context of enemy opposition and his own political shortcomings. Clearly he made tactical errors, and so did his American advisors, but the central consideration was that the strategy of creating a nation from the top down and within a short span of years, starting without trained

cadre or accepted doctrine, was perhaps impossible, given the almost 30-year organizational headstart of the enemy. In failing in the end and for a variety of reasons to organize a viable nation from the top down, Diem actually exacerbated the problem by further destroying the power of the traditional village authorities -- as the French had also done in their time — and thus increasing the local vacuum before he had time to fill it from above. The Communists could have filled it, but Diem could not in the time span allowed by events.

The American Role in Viet-Nam

It now becomes necessary to interrupt our historical recitation again to examine the U.S. role in Viet-Nam, since the later historical developments are necessarily influenced by actions taken or deferred on the U.S. side. This digression also provides an opportunity to develop some of the lessons which America should learn from the Viet-Nam experience. Thus we will have things to say about U.S. methodology in Viet-Nam, as well as about U.S. purposes and programs. Specifically, I will concentrate on some American failures and why they occurred — which is of course easier to do from hindsight, although many of the errors were knowingly committed even at the time.

Obviously the U.S. could have done better in Viet-Nam, even if one admits the enormous inherent difficulties confronting us in trying to help convert a complex of people, problems and good intentions into a modern state capable of holding its own against an effective,

entrenched and powerful enemy. The master flaw in the U.S. approach to Viet-Nam was failure to take the problem seriously, or to make an adequate commitment to the solution of the problem at the outset, once the decision was made to become involved at all. This essential characteristic of our approach has manifested itself in many ways in Viet-Nam, as I will relate, but first must be itself analyzed.

America came out of World War II with its traditional self-confidence intact. We had again demonstrated that we were unbeatable. We had said: "Let there be airfields across Africa, and a road through Burma, and let Hitler's and Tojo"s armies be defeated" — and (with the help of our Allies) all these and many other things had come to pass. We then said, in effect, "let there be a viable non-Communist state in South Viet-Nam," and expected it to come to pass in short order, without carefully analyzing the problem in advance, and without making any long-term commitments toward its solution. A small or weak nation, conscious of its limitations, would have given highest priority to an objective analysis of reality in Viet-Nam before becoming involved. America failed adequately to do so because we did not regard the task as essential. In our confidence, we were more interested in the reality we could create rather than the reality that existed. Oliver Wendell Holmes said that, to understand something, one must be willing to sit down before the facts like a little child. This is hard for great powers to do.

Our first major shortcoming was our failure adequately to organize the structure of the U.S. effort. Prior to 1967 the U.S. operated in South Viet-Nam through a series of independent agencies, both civilian and military, each implementing its own programs and reporting more or less directly to Washington. This prevented us from bringing to bear even such expertise as we developed, and from properly structuring the application of our considerable resources and influence. Let me cite a single major example. Prior to 1965 when U.S. forces were introduced into Viet-Nam in quantity, the greatest single American tactical failure lay in our failure to give adequate support and priority to Vietnamese territorial forces. North Viet-Nam had not elected to invade South Viet-Nam in a massive Korea-like operation. Instead its tactic was to attack the Government of Viet-Nam from within the country by means of local guerrilla action, sabotage and assassination. To counter such an attack, the key security elements available to the South Vietnamese were the territorial forces (and also the National Police). The territorial forces, who in recent years have been known as the Popular Forces and Regional Forces, were supported neither by the U.S. civilian agencies nor by the U.S. military. The civilian agencies implemented programs of economic and social betterment, and the U.S. military provided assistance to the regular Vietnamese army, while the territorial forces fell between the chairs. It was widely recognized by individual U.S. civilian and military

personnel that the territorial forces both inflicted and received more casualties than did the National Army, and that the essential war was taking place at the local levels — at province, district, village and hamlet. While individuals recognized the problem, institutions did not, and there was no over-all guiding mechanism in the U.S. Mission which could direct the re-allocation of U.S. resources and translate individual insights into institutional programs. It is quite possible that if a U.S. organization had existed which could have thrown assistance behind the territorial forces, the later commitment of U.S. troops in quantity in 1965 might have been totally avoided.

What should such U.S. organization have been? While there are perhaps several possible solutions, it is submitted that the most rational and soundest approach would have been to provide to the U.S. Ambassador a joint civilian-military staff which would have given him competence to assume complete command over all personnel and operations in Viet-Nam, including the day-to-day operation of the entire effort. Such a staff of experts, assigned to Viet-Nam for extended tours, could have absorbed and retained the insights individually available in Viet-Nam and established continuous doctrine which could have guided not only U.S. efforts prior to 1965, but also the utilization of U.S. combat forces after 1965 (assuming for the moment that the U.S. buildup would have in fact taken place).

After 1965, when the decision was taken to introduce U.S. divisions into Viet-Nam, such units were sent there without any precise guidance as to their modus operandi. They naturally tended to do the thing for which they had been trained, namely to look for and fight a conventional war. For a brief period the enemy obliged by staging set-piece battles which the U.S. forces won, but thereafter the enemy reverted largely to guerrilla warfare while our forces, lacking the guidance which an appropriate U.S. joint staff could have provided, tended to continue to operate in a conventional manner. This implied the utilization of heavy firepower, whether in air strikes, reconnaissance by fire, harrassment and interdiction by fire, and other tactics which could only result in excessive damage to the civilian population of Viet-Nam. This has been a classic and tragic case where inappropriate means have largely obscured or sullied legitimate ends. Too many people today forget that there would be no war in Viet-Nam and no American soldiers there at all if nine men in the Politburo in North Viet-Nam were not determined to impose their will upon South Viet-Nam, Laos and Cambodia, and that it was entirely reasonable and consistent with our national ideals and national interest as conceived in the early 1950's that we should assist the South Vietnamese to preserve themselves. Our way of doing so, however, became so inappropriate to the ends desired that even the validity of the ends became obscured and called into question. It is submitted that this

error, which is primarily one of military tactics, could largely have been avoided had the United States properly organized itself for the conduct of this type of struggle.

Examples of the master flaws in our approach to the Viet-Nam problem prior to 1967 are legion. Here are just a few. Virtually every civilian or military officer long exposed to Viet-Nam reached the clear conclusion that the one-year tour for military advisory personnel simply made no sense (particularly in the days when it was feasible to bring families to Saigon). Again and again military advisors would leave country just as they were beginning to understand the situation and become useful. Before 1965, many of them were obliged to leave against their will, despite their pleading to remain to do a job to which they had become committed emotionally as well as professionally. Why? First, because the army wanted to expose as many officers as possible to the Viet-Nam experience, in the interests of a more experienced army. (I can remember one officer telling me that "the Russians must be green with envy. They have had no junior officers exposed to combat experience since World War II, while we're turning out thousands every year.") Second, the military officers in other non-Viet-Nam assignments knew that a Viet-Nam tour was essential to promotion and career advancement. They wanted their crack at Viet-Nam, too. Both of these concerns were human and understandable, but they had nothing to do with winning the struggle, if one in fact

took the struggle seriously. They guaranteed permanent amateurism in a situation that demanded immense sophistication. Already in the early '60's it was a common observation in Viet-Nam that "we don't have 10 years experience here, but one year 10 times over."

On the civilian side, particularly after the buildup in late 1964, there was great pressure to "get people out to Viet-Nam." The military were building up, and the civilians would have to build up too, "if they wanted to stay in the ball game." Old Viet-Nam hands would protest, then as now, "what we need out here in quality, not quantity," but to no avail. Not until 1967 was any serious attempt made to train U.S. "advisors" in the skills, including language, needed to make them useful in the particular situation of Viet-Nam.

Again, our use of "leverage" was allowed to be ineffective. Let me offer one illustration of this point. In 1964 the Viet Cong took temporary control of a pro-Government village in Tay Ninh Province, and announced to the world that they would stay there for 48 hours. The Government of Viet-Nam (GVN) had to react or lose face. Accordingly, an ARVN battalion was despatched to the scene and approached to within 600 yards of the village complex, beyond which the ARVN Major in command refused to move. His American advisor, Captain Cunningham, went forward with his sergeant and encountered only light enemy fire. He advised his counterpart that the village could easily be enveloped and taken by infantry

tactics, with minimum damage to the friendly population. The ARVN officer refused, insisting that aircraft be called in to bomb the village. This was done. Of course the Viet Cong had already withdrawn, leaving behind only a small rear guard. Only some five Viet Cong were killed in the bombardment, but more than 30 villagers—men, women and children. Captain Cunningham, with whom I talked the next morning, was livid with anger, and said that the only way the GVN could reclaim the loyalty of that village would be to discipline the ARVN commander for cowardice on the spot. I discussed the case with a senior U.S. General in MACV who stated he would try to get disciplinary action taken by the ARVN Divisional Commander. In fact, the ARVN Major was merely transferred — and to a better assignment. Shortly thereafter, Captain Cunningham was killed in action.

In this situation the U.S. military had no leverage to exert on the ARVN military structure, but under a unified U.S. command structure, leverage could have been easily applied by another U.S. agency. For example, if the GVN had been told that imports of certain U.S.-funded commodities would be held up until appropriate action was taken, such action would have been taken.

Still another fundamental error — and hopefully lesson learned — was in the concept of the "blank check." The U.S. gave to the Vietnamese unconditional guarantees of support and virtually open-ended resources without in fact tying such aid to adequate

Vietnamese performance. This policy deprived us and our Vietnamese allies of the most important single element of victory — the South Vietnamese instinct of self-preservation.

Again, it was proven repeatedly in Viet-Nam that a program would work only if there were Vietnamese on hand willing and able to carry it out. But this self-evident fact — which implied training, and enough time to form adequate cadre where they did not exist -- was seldom faced squarely. Instead we would draw up plans and turn on the resources — and then wonder why the program failed. I recall the British Ambassador remarking in 1963 that the Strategic Hamlet program would fail if only because there were not sufficient trained cadre of adequate quality to carry it out. He was right.

The list could be multiplied at length. The essential point is that when things were not going right and virtually everyone at the operating levels knew it, and usually could identify the reason, corrective action would not be taken because of a lack of commitment to the problem, made possible by the underlying psychology that we were a big power and "would win anyway," and by our failure to organize ourselves properly for the task. It took tragic years to correct these shortcomings, and indeed some consequences remain to this day. As only one example, U.S. personnel are still shifted around during their tour in Viet-Nam "in order to give them command time" or to otherwise suit their career advantage, often to the detriment of the job that needs to be done.

The Turning Points of the War

In 1967-68, what had been in the over-all a losing struggle became a winning one, although this conclusion is not as widely recognized in the United States as in Viet-Nam, and indeed will not be proven to be valid until the final result is achieved — or not achieved. Certain landmarks of the 1967-68 reversal are clearly discernible. In April 1967, the U.S. finally took steps to address its organizational problem in Viet-Nam with the formation of CORDS, which was at least a second-best solution, and far better than none. The initials stand for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support, and the organization was created by joining civilian and military personnel and organizations into a single group charged with meeting the needs of the situation in the area of "pacification." This perhaps ill-chosen word refers to that complex process by which the Vietnamese, with U.S. support, could fill the political, administrative, economic and security vacuums that existed in the Vietnamese countryside and which explained the country's weakness in the face of the enemy's threat. CORDS, headed by Ambassador Robert W. Komer, was placed under the command of the Commanding General, Military Assistance Command Viet-Nam. Through it, the U.S. finally achieved the advantages of a joint staff although not at the level of the total U.S. Mission, but at least within the framework of the U.S. military. Through CORDS, a union was possible of accumulated civilian experience in Viet-Nam

and military resources and discipline. CORDS is to be credited with two achievements of major significance. The first was the recognition, albeit many years too late, that territorial security was the dominant prerequisite to the success of all other political, economic and social programs, and that to achieve such territorial security, support must be given to the Vietnamese territorial forces. This change in thrust of U.S. programs was fought for and won by CORDS led by Ambassador Komer. The results in terms of improved security in the countryside in Viet-Nam have been dramatic. Secondly, CORDS greatly assisted the Government of Viet-Nam through Central Pacification and Development Councils at each echelon of the government to bring improved management and discipline into the Vietnamese effort. Thus, it is realistic to say that the formation of CORDS provided one of the key turning points in the direction of the struggle in Viet-Nam.

A second factor of great importance involved the Viet Cong Tet attacks in 1968. These dramatic attacks, which had an outstanding political impact in the United States favorable to the enemy's cause, proved to be a disaster for the enemy in Viet-Nam. For one thing, they were launched during a period held sacred by ancient Vietnamese traditions, which caused the aggressors to lose the moral support of masses of the Vietnamese population. The population did not rise up to support the Viet Cong. The enemy exposed and lost the flower of his junior and middle level leadership, and the Tet attacks also

brought the war home to the non-committed urban populations and made it politically possible for the Government of Viet-Nam to institute national mobilization as a result. In surviving the Tet onslaughts, the GVN gained confidence in itself and emerged stronger from the confrontation, just as the enemy's power declined drastically from that time forward.

Finally, the decision of President Johnson to withdraw from the political arena signaled to the Vietnamese in terms they could understand the end of the fatal American policy of the "blank check." They realized that the United States would come under some new leadership and that the policy of guaranteed survival was at an end. The Vietnamese Government leaders noted — and were informed by their American counterparts — that an irreversible change of political direction was taking place in the United States and that, in a matter of time, South Viet-Nam would have to stand alone. The U.S. withdrawal policy which began with the decision of President Johnson not to run for the U.S. presidency has had notably salutary effects in Viet-Nam. Not only has it tended to re-stimulate the dormant Vietnamese instinct for self-preservation and latent Vietnamese pride, but also it has provided for a net increase in local security. One example of this latter phenomenon might be in point. The U.S. Ninth Division formerly had a major base at Dong Tam in the Delta area southwest of Saigon. Physically touching the wire perimeter around that base was located

the hamlet of Vinh Kim. In October 1969, I talked with a Vietnamese girl who had recently visited that hamlet and spoken openly with the Viet Cong cadre who were running the hamlet under the very shadow of U.S. guns. The explanation was simple. In a U.S. area of responsibility, the Government of Viet-Nam apparatus was largely dismantled. U.S. fire-power totally prevented overt military activity by the enemy, but offered little hindrance to political organization since U.S. personnel could not speak Vietnamese and had only a very limited awareness of what was going on around them. In such a situation, the withdrawal of U.S. forces, returning the area to Vietnamese control, made it no longer possible for the enemy to conduct overt political organization among the people. The presence of U.S. forces in this instance effectively prevented the Government of Viet-Nam from filling the local politico-administrative vacuum, which we have seen is the essential key to ultimate success in the struggle. Today, with U.S. forces gone from the area, the Viet Cong cannot control Vinh Kim openly, if indeed they control it at all.

Vietnamese Efforts to Fill the Vacuum

Following the shift of priority to support of territorial forces, the GVN instituted a series of programs which were, at long last, directed at the real problem. In April 1969, President Thieu promulgated Decree 45 by which administrative power was officially restored to the villages, and village officials began to be trained in sizable numbers. A police presence began to be extended down to the lowest levels of

the population. A political decision was taken to arm the local citizenry in large numbers for their own defense. Steps were taken to resume the momentum of land reform. Not only village officials but provincial councils were elected and given increasing powers — a process which should soon be extended to Province Chiefs themselves. Greater emphasis was placed on trying to uproot and destroy the Viet Cong infrastructure.

In the urban areas, some progress was made in improving administrative services — an aspect too often neglected as being unimportant when in fact it is of great political importance in the vacuum-filling process, and usually more relevant than firepower.

All these programs must be improved, but the essential thing is that the problem has been increasingly recognized since 1967-68, even if not always addressed adequately. If the Vietnamese, in fact, continue to fill their local vacuums from the bottom upward, a process to be complemented by better performance at the top and from the central level downward, it follows that South Viet-Nam will become a viable state not subject to destruction by internal insurgencies. If not, it will fall. The improvement in Vietnamese internal viability and development must be accompanied by a "letting go" on the U.S. side. The Vietnamese may sink, but they must be allowed to swim in any case. The U.S. withdrawal process is good not only for us but for them, and it should go forward somewhat faster than as carried out heretofore.

Additional Lessons Learned

Regarding U.S. personnel staffing of any future counterinsurgency operations, we must next time give more than mere lip service to the principle that quality is far more important than quantity. Instead of, in effect, bribing large numbers of Americans to go to such countries by special pay inducements and by relaxation of qualifications criteria, the reverse should be done. It should be made policy that only the "first team" would be allowed to go, in small numbers and on a volunteer basis. This is not unrealistic. Prior to 1965 in Viet-Nam the entire civilian and military advisory staffs could have been filled by ardent volunteers. The best people want to be where the action is, particularly if honor, prestige and ultimate career advantage are attached to the assignment. It is dismal psychology to present the case as one in which no one would wish to become involved unless bribed to do so. It would be sounder, and in the long run more effective, to appeal to pride rather than cupidity in the recruitment process.

Again, training and standards must be insisted on and maintained. This applies to U.S. advisory personnel, and equally to local officials. In Viet-Nam we poured in resources despite obvious evidence that the Vietnamese civil servants were not qualified to administer them. As a French observer put it, "il faut former les esprits d'avance." Basic reform of the Vietnamese civil service in the 1950's would have been more effective in attaining our objectives in Viet-Nam than many divisions of U.S. combat troops. Programs succeeded in Viet-Nam

where the Vietnamese staff was competent and failed where it was not.

Conclusions

Next time, may America (1) make a more professional and detached assessment of a local situation before becoming involved; (2) never attempt to substitute its will for the lack of will of another, or provide more assistance than the recipient is realistically capable of absorbing; (3) if involved, place our faith more in skill than in wealth or power; (4) assure that means are kept consistent with the ends desired; and (5) conduct the U.S. effort through a centralized command situation in which political factors are kept predominant.

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