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THE MANAGEMENT PROBLEM IN VIET-NAM

There are many lessons to be learned from our Viet-Nam experience. The essential task is to sort out these lessons and assign them the proper priorities. The purpose of this brief memorandum is to attempt to identify the central problem which affected our performance both during the "pre-buildup" period 1959-65, and again after the US military intervention of 1965.

The theme of this paper is a simple one; namely, that the root cause of our failure to handle properly the insurgency problem in Viet-Nam was the failure of the US Government to organize itself properly for the conduct of such a mission. I think it can be very persuasively argued that if the United States Government had set up an organization as described below in the early 1960's, many of the tragedies and shortcomings of our Viet-Nam involvement could have been averted. Specifically then, the argument is propounded that the United States Government should have provided not only the best qualified ambassador at each stage (which it tried to do), but should have given him a joint civilian-military staff to enable him, on a day to day basis, to exercise direct and complete command of all US personnel and programs in Viet-Nam, reporting directly to the President.

Let me illustrate this point by citing the greatest single flaws in our approaches, both before 1965 and after. Before 1965, the US found itself obliged to assist the Vietnamese to respond to an insurgency situation fomented from North Viet-Nam but executed by local dissidents in the South. Many programs of an economic, social, or security nature were vigorously implemented, but proved inadequate for one predominant reason. This was that the problem of local security was never singled out as the key element upon which all other programs must be hinged. Many civil and military personnel operating in Viet-Nam at the time were well aware, for example, that "pacification" really took place from the province level downward. It was also recognized that the Vietnamese forces in a position to respond to the local security problem were the territorial forces, but substantially no support was given to these forces in terms of US assistance, while the ARVN remained for many years the sole chosen instrument for US military assistance. There was no mechanism on the ground in Saigon to translate insights widely available and generally recognized into appropriate restructuring of the US effort. The civil agencies vigorously pursued their own programs related to pacification, while the US military energetically attempted to build up the effectiveness of ARVN. The territorial forces fell between chairs. This happened even though President Diem specifically requested assistance for the territorial forces. One can very plausibly conjecture that if a US mechanism had existed which could have re-directed the reallocation of US resources, or recommended such reallocation with one voice to the President of the United States, it might have been possible to avoid the tragic series of events which ultimately led to massive US intervention in 1965.

The same lesson may be applied even more dramatically to the events of 1965 and thereafter. In 1965 the decision was made to inject US military power into Viet-Nam in sizeable proportions. These military forces were not given any clearly defined modus operandi. Indeed, what structure within the United States Government would have been in a position to give the military the detailed guidance so obviously required by the nature of the problem in Viet-Nam? US military forces therefore arrived in country looking for World War II or Korea. The enemy obliged for a very brief period in set-piece battles which we won in the traditional manner, but thereafter remained uncooperative. The US military, lacking any organization to which it could look for the kind of guidance it deserved and needed, then proceeded to fight a version of previous conventional wars even while the enemy was playing under different rules. This led to the excessive utilization of U.S. firepower, air power, reconnaissance by fire, harassment and interdiction fire and other tactics which could only result in massive damage to the civilian population. This process, carried out over the years, came to represent such an obvious misapplication of means to ends, that the American people, as well as much of the world, found it increasingly difficult to support the war. It is tragic that the noble ends which the United States sought in Viet-Nam became in time so infected by ill-chosen means that finally the validity of the ends was lost from sight and became virtually meaningless.

What was needed to avoid this tragic miscarriage of US policy was the existence of a field command structure such as indicated above. Clearly a well-chosen ambassador supported by a combined civilian and military staff and given complete command of US operations in Viet-Nam could have provided guidelines for the conduct of military operations which would have avoided many of the anomalies actually encountered. In a situation such as Viet-Nam it was entirely unfair to the US military to dispatch it to the field to figure out what kind of a problem existed and what kind of tactics to use. Since the problem was so clearly political, with military force being only one extension of political purpose, and since the type of military tactics used was inextricably linked with the political purposes to be achieved, it seems quite clear that it was irresponsible on the part of the US Government to give military commanders in Viet-Nam the free hand and lack of guidance that they in fact received.

No doubt the formation of CORDS in 1967 represented a belated and second-best attempt to improve the situation. The most significant achievement of CORDS was that it became possible, within that organization, to reallocate resources to the territorial forces, which in turn resulted in and explains the substantial improvement in all aspects of pacification which exists in Viet-Nam today. Nevertheless, CORDS, under military command, was not able to orchestrate the struggle in Viet-Nam in such a manner as to eliminate the inappropriate uses of military power, which have continued relatively unabated, and are even now being eliminated only as a consequence of withdrawal of US forces from the area. Had there existed a US command element in Saigon as outlined above, the problems which CORDS belately solved or never solved could have been eliminated at an earlier stage.

The foregoing relates to the past. What is disturbing today is that the major organizational lesson which would have to be applied to any future Viet-Nams has not yet been clearly delineated from the Viet-Nam experience, even though the lesson to be learned seems clear, at least with the advantages of hindsight. It is therefore submitted that if the United States finds it advisable in the future to become involved in foreign insurgency situations, the first organizational decision should be to assure the appointment of the best qualified ambassador and to provide him with a joint civil and military staff acting as a total command echelon at the field level, with responsibility over both civilian and military programs. If the ambassador's staff is well selected and given the time and resources required to study the local problem professionally, there is every reason to believe that the mistakes of Viet-Nam would not have to be repeated. But it is important that doctrine on this subject be established now, so that we do not go into any future Viet-Nams fumbling and groping to learn anew lessons already learned.

Ogden Williams

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