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(II)

PREFACE

Members of the staff of the Committee on Foreign Relations are sometimes asked to undertake special assignments for the committee. In early December, two staff consultants, James G. Lowenstein and Richard M. Moose, were asked to visit Vietnam and to provide the committee with a personal and confidential report on the progress of pacification, the prospects for Vietnamization, the domestic political situation and the outlook for negotiations. In connection with the last of these, they were asked to stop briefly in Paris on their way back from Saigon.

Upon their return to Washington, Mr. Lowenstein and Mr. Moose presented an oral report to the committee in executive session. They subsequently prepared a detailed classified forty-page report at my request.

I found their classified report to be sober, dispassionate and revealing. I therefore asked them to review and edit it so that it might be made public. As a result of their review, it was necessary to delete classified information and certain portions of the report which were considered by the authors to be too sensitive to be published. Furthermore, the entire section in the report on the outlook for negotiations was deleted in accordance with the wishes of those interviewed and because of the obviously delicate nature of the subject matter. Portions of the report dealing with internal politics of Vietnam were deleted for the same reasons.

The report has given me some sense of the realities of the continuing American involvement in Vietnam. Each reader will, of course, draw his own conclusions. For my own part, I can only hope that, in the future, the decisions we make in Vietnam will be guided by realities and not, as in the past, by well-intentioned hopes or unintentional rationalizations.

J. W. FULBRIGHT.

VIETNAM: DECEMBER 1969

I. ITINERARY

We arrived in Vietnam on December 7 and left on December 18. We spent six days in Saigon, in the course of which we talked to Ambassador Bunker, General Abrams, Ambassador William Colby, who is General Abrams' deputy for Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS), AID Director Donald MacDonald, other senior mission officers and the more junior officers in CORDS and in the political and economic sections of the Embassy.

We had a number of conversations in Saigon with American and foreign correspondents and also met with various foreign diplomats. In addition, we talked to many Vietnamese in the Government—including a number of cabinet officers—and in the National Assembly, as well as former government officials and private citizens. Among others, we talked to members of the Government bloc in the Assembly, politicians who support the Thieu administration, opposition leaders, army officers, former officials of various previous governments, lawyers, journalists and academicians. Some appointments were made by the Embassy but most were arranged by us through private channels. Many of our conversations were in French.

For four and a half days we traveled outside Saigon. We spent two days in IV Corps, the southernmost delta region of Vietnam, visiting the towns of Can Tho, Cao Lanh, Tinh Binh, Rach Gia, Bac Lieu and Soc Trang by helicopter. We also visited a number of hamlets by helicopter, boat, and jeep. We talked with senior American and Vietnamese military officers, Vietnamese province chiefs and American province senior advisers and various less senior American and Vietnamese military personnel and civilians at every level down to hamlet.

In a subsequent two-day period, we visited I Corps, the northernmost part of Vietnam, where we met with senior American and Vietnamese military commanders, various officers on the corps commander's advisory team, province chiefs, province advisers and American and Vietnamese of less senior rank. We visited four of the five provinces in I Corps, spending some time in six villages in addition to province capitals. We traveled not only by helicopter but also by jeep and Honda.

We also spent one night in Dalat, the former French mountain resort in II Corps, where we stayed with the province senior adviser and met a number of local military, intellectual, religious, and political figures.

II. INTRODUCTION

We concentrated our attention on three principal subjects: The progress of pacification; the prospects for Vietnamization; and the Saigon political scene, as it is intimately related to both pacification and Vietnamization. We attempt, in this report, to refrain from making judgments. To employ the analogy of the half-filled water glass, our objec-

tive is not to characterize the glass as half empty or as half full but rather to describe the water level.

Before turning to our observations, we believe that it is necessary to point to several considerations, perhaps not obvious to those who have not visited Vietnam:

A. From the first to the last hour of our stay, we were struck by the fact that no conclusion seems to stand up from one conversation or experience to the next. To illustrate: One evening a reporter, generally regarded as one of the most knowledgeable journalists in Vietnam, was talking about the disposition of North Vietnamese troops in the western highlands of I Corps. He said that they were forced to camp along river beds as they needed large quantities of running water to clean and cook their rice. The following day we talked with an American Army officer who is reputed to know as much about Vietnam as any American. When we advanced the reporter's theory, he assured us that anyone who knew anything about the country realized that at intervals the North Vietnamese cooked enough rice to last several days and then carried the rice with them as they traveled, and that they preferred to avoid the river beds in order to obtain the protection of the cover found at higher elevations.

B. It follows that a visitor to Vietnam can easily find evidence to support any case he wishes to make. Almost any number of Americans and Vietnamese, can be found to substantiate, or refute, any thesis. In fact, disagreement exists even within official institutions, despite the constraints of institutional discipline. Within the American mission, below the very senior level, there are distinct differences of opinion and disagreements on the facts and their interpretation. The same is true in the military.

C. Briefings add to the difficulties of comprehension, in a situation where contradiction is the rule rather than the exception. Visitors receive briefings literally every step of the way in Vietnam—in Saigon, at Corps headquarters, in every province capital, by officials in district towns and even at the village and hamlet level. Every American and every South Vietnamese military unit seems to have a briefing board with acetate overlays, a stainless steel pointer and a set script—no matter how small the unit or how remote its location. At most briefings facts and figures are presented in such profusion and with such rapidity that it is impossible to correlate or analyze the information. In a few cases, we were able to secure the scripts of briefings and these proved to be of some value, although our impression, on carefully rereading these scripts, was that what had been omitted was often as significant as what had been included. In sum, whether inadvertently or deliberately, briefings do not objectively present the pros and cons but rather emphasize progress and accomplishment. Being briefed in Vietnam is somewhat like being told to buy product X without being told what is wrong with it or why to buy product Y.

D. Finally, there is another serious problem of communication and that is the almost hopeless task of trying to find out what the Vietnamese really think as distinct from what they say to Americans or in the presence of Americans. In fact, it is usually difficult even to know what they say. It would have been impossible for us to have meaningful conversations in English with many Vietnamese politicians in

Saigon. Yet many American journalists, military officers and civilian officials do not speak French much less Vietnamese.

Vietnamese is, of course, essential in rural Vietnam. There are thousands of American military officers and civilians who have had between 28 days and a year of Vietnamese language training. But only a handful, at most, seem to have true fluency in the language and an appreciation of the manner that necessarily goes with using it effectively. For example, we visited one village in company with an American colonel who had spent a year in language training and a major who is one of the few U.S. military officers in Vietnam who is truly bilingual. The colonel asked us what we would like him to ask the villagers. We suggested that he simply talk to them about conditions there. He chatted with a group for ten minutes. We then asked him what questions he had posed. He said that he had asked them how many Vietcong had been killed or captured recently, how many terrorist incidents there had been, and so forth. After telling us what numerical replies had been received, he summed up by saying that the general attitude of the villagers was that everything was fine and that they were "relaxed" about the situation, a statement that was difficult to accept in light of the fact that his remarks were punctuated by intermittent mortar fire.

The bilingual major then talked with the villagers, laughing with them, and using his hands and facial expressions to make them smile. We asked him what questions he had asked. He said that he had asked only one and that was: "Is this village happy or sad?" The answers by the thirty or so villagers to this one question conveyed to us a rather different impression of the attitude of the villagers. The major summed up their replies by saying that they seemed to be on edge, to have little hope for the future and to have no faith in either the Communists or the Government. One villager said, in effect, that while they were being protected by the Americans, it was the presence of Americans that made protection necessary.

III. PACIFICATION

Virtually all of the Americans and Vietnamese to whom we talked believe that the so-called pacification program, or Revolutionary Development program, is better organized than it has been in the past, has profited from previous mistakes, and is producing considerable evidence of progress. The indicators of progress most frequently cited were these:

A. According to the hamlet evaluation system, or HES as it is called, 92 percent of the population in the country is presently in A, B, and C category hamlets and is thus considered to be "relatively secure." In October 1968, this figure was 69.8 percent. Even in the Delta, traditionally the least secure of Vietnam's four corps tactical zones and the area where most Vietcong have been recruited, the HES analysis is that 88 percent of the population resides in A, B, and C hamlets.

B. Lines of communication are far more secure. In the north, large stretches of Highway 1 were open that have not been in years. It was possible, we were told, to reach all Delta province capitals by road, at least during the day, and the canals in the Delta were open for the first time in many years, thus assuring an adequate flow of food to Saigon.

C. The number of defectors from the Vietcong and from the North Vietnamese Army under the Chieu Hoi program was higher in 1969 than in any previous year. The number of Hoi Chanh, or "ralliers" as these defectors are officially called, reached 43,599 by November 30 and included more North Vietnamese than in any previous year. The totals in the two previous years were 27,178 in 1967 and 18,171 in 1968.

D. Local government institutions are being rapidly developed. There are local government programs in 92 percent of the villages and 91 percent of the hamlets, meaning that most village and hamlet chiefs and village and hamlet councils are elected rather than appointed. Province and municipal council elections are scheduled to be held in April.

E. The Phoenix program had resulted in some 15,000 VCI, meaning Vietcong infrastructure, or cadre, being "neutralized" in 1968 and a somewhat larger number "neutralized" in the first ten months of 1969. (The Phoenix program, formally established by Vietnamese Presidential decree in July 1968 but not publicly revealed by President Thieu until October 1969, is a coordinated intelligence and operational effort designed to route out Vietcong by killing them, capturing them, or converting them to the Government side; the term "neutralized" is used for all these results.) Of the 15,000 VCI neutralized in 1968, some 15 percent were killed, 72 percent captured, and 13 percent defected. Of the VCI neutralized last year through October, the percentage killed was almost double that in 1968.

F. The refugee population has been reduced from 1.5 million at the end of February 1969, to 416,514 as of November 30. Of this total 174,786 were in refugee camps, 144,388 in the resettlement process, and 97,340 outside of centers. New refugees are still being generated—14,000 in October, 11,181 in November, and a total of 97,181 between January and November 1969—but more are being taken off, than added to, refugee rolls. For example, in November while 11,181 new refugees were being generated, 73,255 were returned to their original homes and 112,465 were "resettled," in some cases, apparently, by declaring that refugee camps were now economically and socially viable settlements and no longer camps. Incidentally, we were told that while it had once been considered desirable to generate refugees—because they would presumably become sympathetic to the Government or would at least be under Government control—it was no longer regarded as advantageous and the military were being told not to do so purposely.

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There is, as we have noted, general agreement that the facts recited above do represent progress. On the other hand, we encountered considerable skepticism regarding the accuracy of some of these indicators and the significance of others. For example:

A. Almost no one seems to believe the HES statistic that 92 percent of the population of South Vietnam is "relatively secure." Even the Embassy's standard unclassified background paper states that "HES is by no means absolute in its accuracy but it does show trends from month to month." In response to a question from us, one American official said that he thought the figure should be at least 15 percent lower at midnight. A Vietnamese official told us that he thought that only 60 percent of the population was in "well secure areas"—meaning secure at night as well as during the day—and that 60 percent of the

population in C hamlets was not secure at night. Another said that he thought that HES statistics were misleading because Revolutionary Development cadre were unwilling to spend the night in many C category hamlets.

Those who work most closely with HES statistics are defensive about them. They say that they are useful management tools but that they have been misused in the past. CORDS has developed a new set of evaluation questions susceptible to more objectively verifiable responses. Apparently, if the new system were adopted, some of the present favorable percentages would have to be lowered, although we were told that with certain adjustments it would be possible to preserve the current trend line. The new HES system may, however, not be put into use, because of concern that it might detract from the credibility of past figures and result in criticism in the American press.

A somewhat similar situation exists with regard to the HES rating of Saigon itself which is now in the "C" category. This rating reportedly does not please the mayor of Saigon, and he has urged CORDS to upgrade Saigon to the "B" category. The Americans are reluctant to do so, however, partly because of the unfavorable press which might result if a serious incident occurred following the reclassification.

It should be noted, in this connection, that CORDS officials stress the importance of the fact that while quotas and goals are established by the Vietnamese Government, the HES ratings are made by Americans. They contend that this arrangement assures proper incentives and, at the same time, provides a cross-check on performance.

B. There is considerable disagreement among Americans and Vietnamese on the significance of the numbers involved in the Chieu Hoi program. One senior American official told us that he did not think that the number of ralliers was a good indicator of progress because they were often motivated mainly by a desire to be left alone and to disqualify themselves from the draft and other government service. He believes that only about 25 percent of the ralliers are genuine defectors. Many Vietnamese expressed similar views. Still others contended that the program is infiltrated with unrepentant Communists. And while the number of North Vietnamese Army ralliers in 1969 may be higher than in any previous year, that total was only about 350 as of December 1. It is also worth noting that we were told that most ralliers are low level Vietcong, as indicated by the relatively small numbers of weapons they have brought in, and that we were not told that the number had dropped appreciably in the weeks immediately prior to our visit.

Our briefings did not include a presentation of the converse of the Chieu Hoi rate—the South Vietnamese Army desertion rate which continues to be high. Presumably it will be included in briefings only if it drops. (Nor was land reform the subject of briefing charts, again presumably because the record has not been good.)

C. Similarly the Phoenix program has apparently failed to neutralize any significant number of high level Vietcong officials. One American official acknowledged that most of the Vietcong infrastructure (VCI) is intact. The current unclassified estimates is that some 80,000 VCI remain.

Some of the American and Vietnamese officials involved in the day-to-day conduct of the program (there are some 450 U.S. advisory personnel involved in the Phoenix program at national, regional, provincial, district, and city levels) seem to have an exaggerated or inaccurate view of the results achieved. At least, there is some contradiction between statements in briefings and remarks heard in the field. For example, one province chief assured us that "all the VCI in this province are being caught." But the American province senior advisers, when asked why so few VCI were being neutralized, said: "Perhaps there are not that many around." In some areas, there is a noticeable lack of enthusiasm about the program on the part of Vietnamese officials. One American told us that the province chief with whom he worked "will not move on the Phoenix program."

While many officials—both Americans and South Vietnamese—argue strongly that the Phoenix program should be continued, some expressed concern at certain aspects of the program which create at least a potential for abuse: the pressure to meet Phoenix quotas, the difficulty of accurately identifying Vietcong cadre, the potential for misuse by local officials against their enemies, the legal aspects of handling detainees, and the propriety of the extensive American involvement. In connection with the last of these concerns, it should be noted that some Foreign Service Officers are assigned to the Phoenix program.

D. The fact that the Vietcong infrastructure is still intact is attested to by the figures showing acts of terrorism. In the first eleven months of last year, 27,126 Vietnamese were killed, wounded, or abducted by the Vietcong compared to 25,921 in all of 1968. Incidentally, most of these victims came from the general populace. Of the 6,023 killed through November of last year, 4,350 were classed as "general populace," compared to 597 in the Peoples' Self-Defense Forces, 289 refugees, 232 Revolutionary Development workers, 111 national police, and 102 hamlet chiefs, and 92 other hamlet officials.

E. With respect to the development of local government, it should be noted that all province and district chiefs are still military officers. Province chiefs are appointed by the President and district chiefs by the Minister of Interior upon the nomination of the province chief. Although province and municipal council elections will be held in April, these councils will be advisory only, and the power will remain in military hands.

The power and authority of the province chief are considerable. As described in the Embassy's unclassified background paper, the province chief "exercises all general administrative as well as budgetary and fiscal powers within his area. Specifically, he is responsible for maintaining law and order and is also the sector military commander responsible to the ARVN division commander for his area." He also, as noted above, nominates district chiefs.

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The qualifying or negative aspects of the pacification program apart, it seems to be generally agreed that maintaining progress in the program depends primarily upon the ability of the South Vietnamese Government to assure the security of the countryside. In fact, one briefing officer stated that while progress in pacification during 1969 had been gratifying, these gains could be set back by any

concerted enemy effort directed against the program. Many American officials in the field believe that, despite statistical progress, the gains in the pacification are fragile. Several acknowledged that the Vietnamese peasant does not change his political allegiance, if in fact allegiance was ever given, but rather continually adapts himself to what he perceives to be the political realities in his village at the moment.

Continuing progress in pacification appears to depend, too, on maintaining a large American advisory infrastructure. There are American advisers at every military and civilian level both in Saigon and in the field. They are in the Prime Minister's Office, at the Vietnam Training Center and other training schools, in Government ministries, working with the police and with the Phoenix program, and in virtually every sphere of governmental activity. There are sizeable American staffs, virtually duplicating Vietnamese staffs, with the four Vietnamese Corps commanders, with each of the ten South Vietnamese divisions, and at every lower military echelon, in some cases even down to the lowest level of the Popular Force platoon in the hamlet. There are American advisers with large American staffs serving side by side with the 44 Province Chiefs (200 in Dinh Tuong Province alone) and with the 259 District Chiefs. Even in the civil administration, most American advisers are military. In the CORDS program, there are about 1,200 civilians and about 6,200 military personnel assigned. Furthermore, the staffs of the province senior adviser and district adviser report through military channels to MACV, which has administrative authority for the program, and are enjoined from communicating through civilian channels to the Embassy. We were told by several CORDS officials that the bureaucratic struggle for control of the CORDS program continues. The military is seeking to strengthen its position, a prospect some of the civilians, already greatly outnumbered, view with concern.

The situation in the IV Corps tactical zone, the Delta, demonstrates the size of the military and civilian advisory effort. With the withdrawal some months ago of the U.S. 9th Infantry Division, there are no longer U.S. combat forces in the Delta. There are U.S. Naval personnel, several helicopter squadrons and some logistical units, but all combat forces are South Vietnamese. Yet even though there are no American combat forces, there are some 23,000 Americans in IV Corps when all U.S. advisers are included. That figure, we gathered from unofficial sources, was only about 15 percent less than estimated enemy strength in the Delta in December.

There is no doubt that American military and civilian advisers are performing a useful role and that they are working hard under difficult conditions. It seemed to us that their motivation was a combination of missionary zeal, a sympathetic emotional commitment to the Vietnamese and a sense of satisfaction in the authority with which their jobs invest them. There is, we inferred, an element of guilt mixed as well. The quality of those administering the CORDS programs in the field seemed to us to be uneven, an impression confirmed by senior CORDS officials in Saigon. The overall quality of U.S. military personnel assigned to advisory work is reputedly lower than that in U.S. combat units for the simple reason that the better officers prefer, seek and obtain combat duty which is more valuable to their professional

careers. One province senior adviser told us that he knew of no special selection procedure for assigning military personnel to CORDS. He added that he had several unfilled jobs in his organization but that to his certain knowledge many combat units had a surplus of officers without specific assignments. Turnover among the advisers is rapid. Few remain longer than eighteen months.

Although we were told by CORDS officials that the 1970 pacification program was prepared by the Vietnamese, our two days in the Delta coincided with the deadline for the submission of provincial plans to Saigon, and we found American advisers absorbed in its preparation. Undoubtedly the Vietnamese contributed to the plan in a major way, and there is obviously close United States-Vietnamese cooperation. Nevertheless, Americans seem to believe that they provide most of the overall managerial effort. In fact, we were told by both Americans and Vietnamese that the South Vietnamese Government badly needs additional managerial manpower in both its civilian and military endeavors. American officials engaged in the pacification program said that the rate of training of civilian administrators falls far short of the number needed to replace the Americans now engaged in the pacification program alone.

American advisers seem to be devoting little thought to working themselves out of their jobs. They do not allude to an imminent end of the American advisory effort. On the contrary, they give the impression that they expect to be replaced when their tours end by other Americans, and that the presence of American advisers will be required for an almost indefinite period in the future. A Vietnamese politician told us that he thought the United States should reduce the advisory effort to 25,000 "well chosen" advisers, commenting that a sick man who has taken medication for a long time cannot do without it.

IV. VIETNAMIZATION

There has been progress, too, in Vietnamization. More South Vietnamese Army units have been activated. There has been a 50 percent increase in the Popular Forces and Regional Forces since the Tet offensive of 1968. Furthermore, the Tet offensive spurred the South Vietnamese to organize the so-called People's Self-Defense Forces (PSDF), despite considerable and longstanding concern in the South Vietnamese Government at the risks involved in arming the populace. (As of the end of last year, 3,219,084 men and women had been organized, 1,897,981 had been trained and 399,535 had been armed.) The aim is to have the PSDF provide the backbone of local security, releasing the Popular Forces and Regional Forces for district and province defense and for the protection of the Revolutionary Development program. The South Vietnamese Army would thus be free to assume the task of engaging North Vietnamese and Vietcong main force units, a role that is now performed principally, and was formerly performed almost exclusively, by U.S. forces.

The sequence of events in the Delta since the withdrawal of all U.S. ground forces from IV Corps illustrates the difficulties that may arise as Vietnamization proceeds. Almost as soon as the U.S. 9th Infantry Division left Dinh Tuong Province, the enemy force level there began to increase as a result of an influx of troops infiltrating from Cambodia. The three South Vietnamese Army divisions in I Corps were

already fully employed and reinforcements could not be spared from other corps tactical zones. The Regional Forces and Popular Forces, and the small number of Vietnamese Rangers then deployed in the border area, could not stop the heavily armed infiltrating enemy main forces. The Vietnamese corps commander was thus faced with the difficult choice of either protecting the population from resurgent main force units in the heart of the Delta or engaging main force units as they infiltrated. He elected to protect the population, and infiltration continued. As a result, at the time of our visit the security situation in Dinh Tuong and Kien Hoa provinces had deteriorated to the point where American officials acknowledged that some HES ratings might have to be adjusted downward.

As far as problem areas are concerned, it is common knowledge that the quality of South Vietnamese Army units is uneven. The desertion rate continues to be high. We were repeatedly told that officer leadership is still a major problem, especially at the middle and lower ranks. There has apparently been little progress in broadening the social base from which officers are drawn and even less in promoting noncommissioned officers. There are quotas for promoting noncommissioned officers, as there are for every phase of official endeavor in Vietnam, but they are not being met. Various Vietnamese stressed the continuing problems resulting from the low military pay scales. A major told us that he could not live on the equivalent of the \$40 a month he received if he did not have independent means. And a Vietnamese professor said that many noncommissioned officers frequently obtain two and three-day passes to enable them to "moonlight" in order to provide for their families.

There is still heavy dependence on the United States by South Vietnamese Army combat units. Even the 1st Division, supposedly the best in the South Vietnamese Army, requires massive U.S. support and depends heavily on helicopters, 80 percent of which are American. Throughout the country, the United States provides all of the South Vietnamese Army's medivac support.

It was by no means clear to us that there now exists a plan for providing the South Vietnamese with a helicopter capability of their own equivalent to that now being provided by the United States. Fewer Vietnamese helicopter pilots have been trained than the original plan provided. Incidentally, the leadtime for training helicopter pilots is 24 months—six months for English language training and eighteen months for flight training.

With regard to the dependence of the South Vietnamese Army on the United States, in one briefing we were told that the increased effectiveness of South Vietnamese Army units over the past year had been due to:

1. Excellent leadership at the corps, division, regimental, and batallion levels.
2. Markedly increased South Vietnamese confidence.
3. Close and continuous coordination between top U.S. and South Vietnamese commanders.
4. Willing and effective U.S. support of Vietnamese units in those areas in which the South Vietnamese Army is not yet self-sufficient.
5. The continuing practice of combined U.S.-Vietnamese operations especially at the brigade/regimental level.

6. The efforts of the advisers—starting at the top with the senior adviser who meets with the commander on an almost daily basis and extending down through our advisory teams.

Of the six factors quoted above, all but the first two depend on the United States. The statistics given at the same briefing showed that kill rates were considerably higher when Vietnamese units operated in combination with American troops. We were also told, but could not verify, that a higher percentage of reported South Vietnamese "kills" result from U.S. tactical air and artillery support than from direct South Vietnamese Army contact with the enemy.

When Vietnamese military self-sufficiency is discussed by American officers, it is never put in a context of less than two to four years. In fact, planning in connection with Vietnamization seems vague and incomplete when viewed from the field. There does not seem to be a fixed timetable, and the costs involved in training and in turning over equipment to the Vietnamese are never mentioned. Construction work on American bases throughout the country appears to be continuing, for example, although it is explained that such work is not new construction but is related to upgrading and hardening existing facilities. One American newsman who researched the question last June placed the rate of construction expenditure at \$30 million a month. At the time he believed that a total of \$200 million was then available for planned, scheduled construction.

The Vietnamese have apparently not been given target dates. One American official told us that President Thieu wanted "the bulk of U.S. combat forces" pulled out during 1970. But a high Vietnamese official said to us that the United States should not withdraw until South Vietnam was ready which would not be until "1972 or 1973 and 1974." And another expressed confidence that the United States would not pull out more than 100,000 troops a year in the next few years, adding that a redeployment of only 60,000 "would be much better" and that, in any event, he did not expect the United States to pull out more than half its troops. In fact, the talk in Saigon, among Vietnamese as well as Americans, is in terms of keeping some 250,000 troops there for years.

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The question that inevitably arises in any discussion with Americans or Vietnamese about the prospects for Vietnamization is whether the South Vietnamese Army could now, or at any time in the near future, defend against a massive North Vietnamese attack. The views of senior U.S. and Vietnamese military officers and civilian officials reflects a strong belief that the North Vietnamese are no longer capable of mounting a sufficiently powerful attack to defeat the South Vietnamese Army, at least as long as American firepower and air support are available. In fact, some senior American military officers in Vietnam continue to talk of victory and seem to believe that they are held back from achieving it only by public opinion at home. One high ranking American officer said to us: "I have been in three wars and I can always smell victory. If you will let us have six more months, the enemy will be defeated."

The favorable factors cited in military briefings are that the North Vietnamese suffered heavy losses in the Tet offensive and continue to pay a heavy price on the battlefield: that the Vietcong have lost their

traditional manpower base in the Delta because of the gains the pacification program has made there (their recruiting base is now estimated to be about a third as large as at the time of the Tet offensive); that heavy losses of men, supplies, and equipment and repeated defeats have resulted in low enemy morale and disciplinary problems in the Vietcong; that as main combat forces have become primarily North Vietnamese (they are now 70 percent North Vietnamese and 30 percent Vietcong, an almost direct reversal of the situation in 1965) there has been increasing friction between northerners and the southerners in the Vietcong; that the North Vietnamese are not as effective as the Vietcong because they are not familiar with the terrain; and that the reduction in infiltration in 1969 had reduced the size of enemy forces on November 1 by some 40,000 compared to enemy strength at the beginning of the year.

On the other hand, there are Vietnamese, American journalists and even U.S. military officers and officials at middle and lower levels who say that the South Vietnamese Army could not now defend the country against a massive North Vietnamese attack, even with U.S. artillery and air support. A number doubt that the army will ever be able to do so. Some Vietnamese contend that most of their officers agree but cannot say so in the presence of senior officers or high government officials because they would be accused of defeatism and would lose their jobs.

An American journalist who had recently been in the Delta questioned the proposition of diminished enemy effectiveness there. He said that enemy infiltration had been far more purposeful and effective than the U.S. command had acknowledged. His own investigations had led him to the belief that the enemy had made up the losses suffered in the Tet offensive, and he discounted the argument that the North Vietnamese troops, who make up most of the replacements, will prove less effective than locally recruited Vietcong. In his view, the enemy's training programs are rapidly enabling him to overcome initial unfamiliarity with the terrain.

Several Vietnamese stressed their conclusion that there must be a drastic revision in the organization of Vietnam's armed forces. According to one Vietnamese source, the South Vietnamese Army is scheduled for a major reorganization and redeployment in June 1970. We were told by the same source that many junior Vietnamese officers feel strongly that the Army must be reorganized if it is to carry on effectively after the Americans depart and that an essential element of any such reorganization must be to remove corrupt or ineffective senior officers who owe their present commands to their political connections with President Thieu.

At this point in time, of course, the question of the South Vietnamese Army's effectiveness can only be considered in the abstract, as it has not really been put to the test. The North Vietnamese and Vietcong seem to have switched to a policy of "opposing maximum force with minimum force," avoiding confrontations by large units and concentrating instead on small unit actions, sapper attacks and so forth designed to keep American casualties at a noticeable level and the pacification program off balance. These minor engagements build to certain "high points" after which the level of enemy activity drops off. There

are frequent warnings by the U.S. military, so frequent they have become almost routine, of the possibility of an impending major military attack, often based on references in captured documents to a winter-spring offensive.

It seemed clear to us, however, that no one has the slightest idea whether the enemy will attack in force during the time the United States is in the process of withdrawing combat forces in order to accelerate the American withdrawal, shake confidence in the South Vietnamese Government, demoralize the army, and disrupt pacification; whether the enemy will continue the "high point" pattern until American combat forces are withdrawn and then strike; or whether, even then, the enemy will concentrate on political subversion and competition in preference to a reintensified military effort. Those who hold these various theories appear tacitly to agree, however, that the choice lies with the enemy.

V. THE SAIGON POLITICAL SCENE

President Thieu's supporters and admirers say that, under his direction, the Government is becoming more effective, if not more popular. Nevertheless, there is no dearth of criticism of the Thieu Government.

The most frequently heard criticism of President Thieu, not only by Vietnamese but by foreign journalists, diplomats, and even American officials at the lower working levels, is that he is becoming more and more "Diemist," which, it is explained, means increasingly autocratic, secretive, and isolated. Many Vietnamese outside the Government seem to feel a growing sense of frustration at what they contend is President Thieu's tendency to run the Government from within a tight circle of close confidants. Thus, those who do not support Thieu seem to fear that they will become an unrepresented minority should the President succeed in consolidating his personal power base by enhancing his control over the civil and military bureaucracy. In this connection, we were told by various sources that Thieu is actively working to build a personal organization within the Vietnamese civil administration. Such an organization would include, at the village level, selected Revolutionary Development cadre and village council members. We were further told that Thieu has considered a plan to pay selected members of each Peoples Self-Defense Force unit (those in the PSDF now serve without pay) in order to assure their personal allegiance. Finally, many Vietnamese consider that Thieu is heavy handed and tactless in dealing with the Assembly.

It seems to be taken for granted by both Americans and Vietnamese that Thieu is determined to maintain himself in power beyond his present term of office which ends in 1971. While many believe that Thieu has the support of no more than 20 percent of the population (Communist support is put at about 15 percent), it is felt that as long as he can count on American support and use the governmental machinery at his disposal he will not attempt to involve other non-Communist political elements in governing the country. On the other hand, these other elements apparently cannot bring themselves to cooperate with the Government partly because they are opposed to it in principle and partly because they are not willing to share power. Thus there seems to be at least one point of agreement between the

U.S. mission, the South Vietnamese Government and the opposition: That it is not possible for Thieu to "broaden the base of his government," at least in the sense of bringing opposition leaders into the cabinet.

Not only are opposition elements unwilling to bring themselves to cooperate with the Government, they are also unwilling to bring themselves to cooperate with one another, and there are no indications that a broad opposition coalition is about to emerge from the conglomeration of political parties, groups not large enough to constitute themselves parties and individual politicians whose political factions are largely, and in some cases even exclusively, personal vehicles. Although we found some common themes running through our conversations with a number of opposition groups, there seems to be no immediate prospect that these common themes will bring together an effective "third force" in the political life of the country. These themes were:

1. In order to rule effectively and preserve a non-Communist regime, a government must represent the majority and have the support of the religions and the sects. The present Government does not.

2. The Government's leaders are mistrusted and surrounded by scoundrels. Thieu does not want strong, independent men working with him, and honest men will not join him. Thus, the Government cannot be reformed.

3. If the present Government remains in power, therefore, Vietnamization will fail. The United States will then not be able to withdraw with honor but as a defeated power. What must replace U.S. troops is the confidence of the people in a government which would deny the enemy a sympathetic population.

4. Yet the present Government will probably remain in power as long as the United States continues to support it. Similarly, the opposition will not succeed without American support.

5. In any case, the legality of the constitution must be respected, for even a poor constitution is better than none. A change of government must therefore be effected legally.

Most opposition politicians give the impressions of being sincerely nationalist and anti-Communist. At the same time, many favor negotiations and compromise, although they are vague about the terms involved. All are vague, too, on how they propose to effect a change of government, so vague in fact that it is difficult to see any practical possibility of such a change occurring. One politician said, for example, that President Thieu could resign or delegate his power to an appointed Prime Minister but offered no explanation of how the circumstances that would produce this result might arise. Another source suggested that Thieu could form an "advisory council" which would initially include representatives of the principal parties, both pro- and anti-government, and of the religious groups and sects and which might eventually be broadened to include present NLF adherents.

One of the important unpredictable factors is the future political role of the Buddhist activists. Opposition politicians with whom we talked invariably sought to identify themselves with Buddhist interests. The militant An Quang Buddhist sect seems to be keenly aware of its leverage but cautious about committing itself on specific political issues or even to any future active role in politics. When we asked various An Quang Buddhist clerics whether they foresaw a more ac-

tive political role for their coreligionists, they invariably replied: "We are studying that question."

On the other hand, one American official told us that he believes there is an even chance that the Buddhists will eventually work within the framework of an emerging Vietnamese "electoral dynamic." There is, he said, even some talk among the Buddhists of forming a political party.

The attitude of the Thieu Government toward the Buddhists is cautious, although the Government has made some gestures in their direction. An American official described these gestures as small but said that almost any gestures would be dismissed as insufficient by the Buddhists.

A case in point: Prior to our arrival, the Government had been asked to permit a Buddhist layman's convention to be held. The Government granted the necessary authority but on condition that the meeting would be nonpolitical. The convention was held during our stay in Saigon and concluded with statements critical of the governments of South Vietnam, North Vietnam and the United States. Parenthetically, one statement warned the Buddhist faithful against opportunistic politicians who might seek to use the Buddhists for their own purposes.

Despite the chaos among opposition ranks, and the ethereal quality of Buddhist political intentions, many who are optimistic about the prospects for Vietnamization in terms of the continued ability of South Vietnam to survive militarily are skeptical about the prospects for the Thieu Government's ability to hold its own in a political struggle with the NLF. On the other hand, there are some who speculate that the confrontation will never take place. They believe that Thieu has already explored the possibility of making a deal with the NLF which would assure his political survival. Still others expect Thieu to start talking to the NLF sooner or later and believe that these talks will produce some sort of peculiarly Vietnamese political arrangement that cannot possibly be foreseen.

A well-informed Vietnamese observer maintained, however, that Thieu's position is too weak to permit him to bargain with the Communists. It is his view, which is shared by some Americans, that while Thieu is not a pawn of the senior Vietnamese generals, the latter are nevertheless capable of exercising a veto on such critical issues as overtures to the NLF.

VI. MISCELLANEOUS OBSERVATIONS

1. Except for vague references by opposition politicians in Saigon to the idea of negotiation, without any reference to the particulars of the settlement such a negotiation might achieve, the subject of negotiations almost never arose during our visit to Vietnam. It was not mentioned in briefings or alluded to by American civilian or military officials.

The only time the subject arose without our raising it was in conversations with An Quang Buddhist clerics. Even they confined themselves to saying that the people on both sides in South Vietnam wanted peace, that President Thieu was obviously not sympathetic to this objective, and that a compromise could only be worked out by a leader who was a man of prestige and was trusted by the people of

South Vietnam. At the same time, they stated flatly that the Vietcong were not neutralists but Communists and "we can't live with Communists." When asked what kind of a negotiation they favored and what sort of a solution such a negotiation should produce, they said that both sides must compromise because neither side was either the winner or the loser. The Buddhists were "studying" how to achieve a compromise solution and whether, in this connection, the Americans should leave Vietnam.

2. A brief word about how Vietnam looks. Flying over and driving through the Delta, our general impression was that the area looks relatively untouched and prosperous. There are no stretches of deserted or razed villages, and we saw only some evidence of past defoliation. Still the war is ever present. The sound of mortar fire is sporadic during the day but almost continuous at night. And when we drove out to the village of Cho Gau, fifteen miles or so outside My Tho, late in the afternoon with some young CORDS officers with whom we were spending the night, they were noticeably nervous when we found ourselves waiting unduly long for a ferry that was to take us across a river that stood between the hamlet and the road back to My Tho.

The view of I Corps from the air is quite different. Along the coast in the vicinity of Route 1, the "street without joy," there are large stretches of desolated country with abandoned and burned out villages and long reaches of defoliated trees and underbrush stretching along canal and river banks.

Perhaps the Vietnamese can best describe their own country. The quotation below is from a pamphlet used at the Vietnamese training center at Vungtau where Revolutionary Development cadre, village and hamlet officials, Peoples Self-Defense Force personnel and others are trained.

Rural Vietnam today is desolate, bleak and in many areas deserted. Gardens are plowed by either bombs and shells or by men digging not furrows for seed but shelters and trenches. Houses appear in irregular patterns, some curiously unscathed by the ravages of war, but many are destroyed or knocked askew and lean drunkenly, adding to the mournful loneliness which is the hallmark of abandoned areas. Previously lush rice fields are overgrown with weeds, the silence unbroken by the peasant's songs passed from generation to generation, the abandoned land devoid of even the herds of cattle and buffalo that formerly roamed. Many villages have become ghost towns, their inhabitants having fled to the cities as war refugees or to the mountains or forests to escape ever-impending death.

3. Some economic facts:

(a) According to published figures, South Vietnam's GVN foreign exchange holdings, as of the end of December, consisted of \$24 million held in gold and \$252 million in U.S. Treasury bills and in dollars plus small amounts in blocked French francs and other currencies.

(b) New austerity "taxes," imposed by decree, are expected to provide a 50-percent increase in South Vietnam's total revenue for 1970. The taxes, which are in reality high tariffs on nonessential imports, were imposed by decree apparently because President Thieu doubted that the Assembly would pass the necessary legislation. (The legality of the decrees was appealed to, and upheld by, the Supreme Court.) The items most affected by the austerity taxes are prepared foods, automobile spare parts and glassware, the cost of which will all increase by more than 150 percent. Further tax increases to raise addi-

tional revenue are being considered by the Government. These have long been urged by U.S. economic advisers, but no Vietnamese Government has been willing to risk the predictably unfavorable reaction. The unpopularity of the new austerity taxes is likely to make the Thieu Government cautious about imposing additional taxes at this time. It is reported that at present Saigon raises less than 30 percent of its revenue by taxation.

(c) Total South Vietnamese imports licensed in fiscal year 1969 were valued at some \$745 million. The Government of South Vietnam was the source of financing for 62 percent of these import licenses and the U.S. Government for 38 percent—28 percent under the commodity import program and 10 percent under the food for peace program. Actual imports in fiscal year 1969 were considerably higher than those in fiscal year 1968 when the total had been \$626 million. Although the percentage of licensed imports financed by the United States was down in fiscal year 1969 to 38 percent, as compared to 48 percent in fiscal year 1968, the absolute cost to the United States rose from \$235 to \$278 million because of the increase in total imports.

The gap between imports and exports is a source of concern to American officials. The value of exports in fiscal year 1969 was variously estimated at between \$15 and \$20 million. The new austerity taxes will be of some benefit in restraining imports, in general, and luxury items, in particular. The South Vietnamese Government plans to reduce overall imports and to encourage exports, possibly by export subsidies. It seems clear, however, that the combined effects of these measures can make only a small dent in the enormous balance-of-payments deficit. In the past this gap has been offset by U.S. aid and U.S. purchases of piastres for military expenditures in Vietnam.

(d) The estimated total of U.S. aid for fiscal year 1970 is \$514.2 million—up from the \$385.3 million total for fiscal year 1969 but below the record totals for fiscal year 1966 (\$684.9 million) and fiscal year 1967 (\$646.3 million). Of the \$514.2 million estimated in fiscal year 1970, \$106 million will be for food for peace under Public Law 480, \$240 million for commercial imports and \$168.2 million for the project program.

The level of U.S. aid began to decline after fiscal year 1967, it was explained to us, because of the fact that the size of free world forces went up and South Vietnamese Government earnings thus rose. It seems to follow that a reduction in American and other free world forces will have a deleterious economic affect, although we were told that the loss of earnings during the first year or two will not be as large as many assume. We were told that it was "difficult" to estimate the level of U.S. aid and spending necessary to keep the economy afloat, and no general estimate was given. But if military expenditures decrease as Vietnamization continues, there would appear to be no alternative to a sizeable increase in direct U.S. assistance.

The total of U.S. aid personnel as of November 30 was 2,551 of which 1,152 were assigned to CORDS and funded by MACV. Total personnel strength was down from 3,349 on June 30, 1968, although the principal reduction was in U.S. contract personnel and not in those directly hired. In the latter category, the reduction was from 1,792 on June 30, 1968, to 1,661 on November 30, 1969.

(e) During 1968 the price level rose 20 percent. In 1969, it rose between 30 and 35 percent. The black market piastre rate is running at about three times the legal rate.

(f) Several American journalists told us that many urban Vietnamese interpreted the announcement of American troop withdrawals as meaning the beginning of the end of the period which had brought them relative prosperity, and that the attitude of these Vietnamese seemed to be to make as much money as possible while the opportunities lasted. According to these correspondents, graft and corruption have increased as office holders hasten to recoup the money they had paid to obtain their present positions. A well-informed Vietnamese businessman told us that real estate values were going down and that commercial buildings were selling for far less than they were worth in terms of the cost of construction.

(g) When queried about Vietnam's economic problems, American officials discounted the possibility that factors such as inflation and the unpopularity of new taxes are likely to have any substantial adverse political effects. At the same time, some Vietnamese tended to view this problem with more concern, citing particularly the inadequacy of military and civil service salaries and the impact of austerity taxes on the middle class and professional people. Such factors are particularly critical in Vietnam's urban areas where population has increased dramatically in the past five years as a result of poor security in the countryside and the economic opportunities to be found in the cities.

Saigon itself is an outstanding example of this phenomenon. The metropolitan area, roughly 22 square miles, now has a population of about 2.2 million, having increased by an estimated half a million since the population estimate of 1968. The resulting density of population is said to be approximately twice that of Tokyo. Several observers concede that the resultant accumulation of urban problems provides a fertile environment for political and social unrest. One American who regularly studies North Vietnamese statements pointed out that they have recently begun to stress economic and social discontent in the South as a major contributing factor to what they believe will be the ultimate downfall of the Thieu regime.

4. There are apparently growing indications of anti-American sentiment, according to reports we heard. We encountered only one such incident ourselves. On our way into Dalat from the airfield, as we rounded a curve on the outskirts of town, we were told that earlier that day a group of South Vietnamese soldiers had thrown rocks at a bus filled with American troops. The bus had stopped and a fight was about to begin when some of the Americans broke it off.

5. A considerable amount of discussion with American officials revolved around the word "commitment." It is no longer argued that we are fighting in Vietnam to stop the relentless march of communism or to deter future wars of national liberation. Rather, using the President Nixon's almost exact words, it is said that we have a commitment to help the South Vietnamese determine their own future and that we cannot walk away from that commitment. Incidentally, several American officials expressed the view that a residual force of one division should remain in Vietnam permanently and that the United States needs to retain the Cam Ranh base and others not only for purposes relating to Vietnam but for wider purposes relating to U.S. strategic interests in Southeast Asia.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

The assumptions regarding the present situation in Vietnam and the expected future course of developments in that country, on which U.S. policy is apparently based, seem to rest on far more ambiguous, confusing, and contradictory evidence than pronouncements from Washington and Saigon indicate. The success of present American policy appears to depend on three factors:

1. The progressive Vietnamization of the military effort,
2. The stability and cohesiveness of the Thieu government,
3. The expectation that the enemy can and will do nothing to inhibit Vietnamization or disrupt the Thieu government's stability.

There is, of course, an intimate relationship among these three factors. Indeed, it may be said that all must succeed—or, perhaps more accurately, that none may fail—if present U.S. objectives in Vietnam are to be realized.

Vietnamization is perhaps the most important factor because the possibility of a continuing, progressive American withdrawal obviously depends upon its success. So does pacification, for the key to its success is security. Thus if Vietnamization fails, the United States cannot withdraw and still claim to have achieved its stated objectives.

The stability and cohesiveness of the Thieu government is of fundamental importance because there must be an agency through which the process of Vietnamization can be effected. Furthermore, given the importance which has been attached to the constitutional legitimacy of the Thieu government, its overthrow would probably plunge South Vietnam into a state of political anarchy and at the same time severely strain public patience in the United States.

As for the enemy's intentions and capabilities, the policy of Vietnamization is based on the assumption that the enemy is either willing to permit, or unable to prevent, the phased withdrawal of American combat forces and the progressive assumption of the combat burden by the Vietnamese. Were the North Vietnamese to launch a massive attack at any point in the course of this withdrawal, the United States would be faced with the agonizing prospect of either halting—or even reversing—the process of withdrawal, on the one hand, or being forced, on the other hand, to effect an accelerated, complete withdrawal which would be interpreted at home, and probably abroad, as a military and political defeat.

We believe that the evidence presented in this report leads to the inference that the prospects for a successful outcome of any one of the aforementioned three factors, much less all three, must be regarded as, at best, uncertain. Dilemmas thus seem to lie ahead in Vietnam, as they have throughout our involvement in this war that appears to be not only far from won but far from over.