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CBS REPORTS

"A Timetable for Vietnam"

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COLLINGWOOD: The question about Vietnam that people want answered most is: When can the United States get out? Now, for the first time in a long time, it has been accepted as official doctrine that American forces are going to leave Vietnam. The argument is not over whether, but when. In that sense, there has been a basic reversal of U.S. policy.

NIXON (VO): After five years of Americans going into Vietnam we are finally bringing American men home. By Dec. 15 over 60,000 men will have been withdrawn from South Vietnam, including 20 per cent of all of our combat forces.

The South Vietnamese have continued to gain in strength. As a result, they have been able to take over combat responsibilities from our American troops.

NIXON:
(ON CAMERA) We have adopted a plan which we have worked out in cooperation with the South Vietnamese for the complete withdrawal of all United States combat ground forces and their replacement by South Vietnamese forces on an orderly scheduled timetable.

THIEU: I can say that in 1970, we will replace the bulk of the fighting troops. But we cannot determine not yet, not now, the specific number and the specific time. And from 1970, we are determined to replace gradually the logistic and combat support troops too.

- KY: In other words, I think with expansion of the Vietnamese armed forces, it's possible for the 1970, more American troops -- hundred, hundred fifty thousand can withdrawing from Vietnam.
- COLLINGWOOD: How long will it take before the armed forces here are self-sufficient?
- COL.MAYER: Well, they should, to the major part of it, the armed forces should be trained by the end of next year. However, we will still have some helicopter pilots and mechanics that will not be completely trained until mid-1971.
- MAJ. HUNG: I believe it takes approximately two to three years to get it completely, the Vietnamese Air Force have enough pilots, I mean fighter pilots.
- GEN. YOUNG: I would say for the force that we contemplate, mid-1972.
- COL. HAYES: I believe in the South Vietnamese Army, it's a good army. It's well trained it's well motivated. With time it's going to be one of the most effective armies out here in Southeast Asia.
- WEBSTER: But the question is, will they have time? How much time will it take?

Col. Hayes: That's a beauty. You really put me on the line, there, boy, I think

COLLINGWOOD:
(ON CAMERA)

Good evening. I'm Charles Collingwood. The end of direct American participation in the war in Vietnam is, finally, in sight. Last week, on national educational television, the U.S. Secretary of State put it flatly:

ROGERS:

We have changed the war from an escalatory situation to a de-escalation and we are going to continue. And when I hear people talk about the fact that our policy has not changed I don't understand what they mean. We have reversed the policy. We are withdrawing troops. We are going to Vietnamize the war. We are going to get American soldiers out of combat. And that's irreversible.

COLLINGWOOD:
(ON CAMERA)

A month ago, President Nixon said he had a timetable for the withdrawal of American forces that would not foreclose the chances of South Vietnam's government to survive. This reporter has just returned from a month in Vietnam in search of that timetable -- and that is what this broadcast is about.

I am convinced a timetable does exist -- that there is a cautious consensus on how quickly American forces can leave without impossible risk to South Vietnam.

It is a timetable which will seem slow to many Americans sick of the war.

However, it now appears most Americans do accept the idea of a gradual U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam.

A CBS News telephone poll last week, sampling 1,154 adults, nationwide, showed:

Only 25 percent favor immediate withdrawal.

Sixty-seven percent oppose a pull-out now, seven percent more than a month earlier.

As to the timetable itself, the poll showed:

67 percent think President Nixon is talking about two years or more to withdraw U.S. troops; and even more -- 79 percent -- think it will take two years or more.

A surprising correspondence with what planners in Vietnam feel is feasible.

Now, the first thing any timetable for withdrawal must take into account is the situation in South Vietnam. Any reporter who has been to South Vietnam as often as I have -- sixteen times now in nine years -- arrives armed against official statements of optimism. They have proved hollow and deceptive too often in the past. The most reliable guide is what you can see for yourself. And what I saw in South Vietnam this time were real and impressive signs of progress.

Surface signs. But they cannot be ignored.

Take, first, Saigon where a fifth of all South Vietnamese now dwell.

Saigon has come alive by night.

A year ago the capital was curfewed and shuttered early in the evening. Now the curfew has been pushed back to one A.M. and is not rigidly enforced.

People stroll casually in the streets where a year ago there was tension -- and sometimes terror -- when darkness fell. Now the night sounds are not those of heavy weapons but of heavy traffic.

By day, traffic is the most dangerous thing in Saigon. In recent months, more people have been killed by traffic accidents in Saigon's urban sprawl of 3 million than have been killed by Viet Cong terrorists.

A year and a half ago, sizeable sections of Saigon were in ruins -- gutted during the enemy's greatest effort to demoralize the people and destroy the government.

This is the same street now. Vivid measurable progress --

It is hard now to see physical scars of 1968's Viet Cong offensives in Saigon.

Refugees -- bombed out, burned-out, in flight from both sides -- are still the most pathetic human

by-products of the war. But early in 1969, there were a million five hundred thousand refugees in South Vietnam. Now there are only half as many and fewer than half of them remain huddled in camps. A quarter of a million people, in 1969, have been able to return to their native villages. The central government has extended its writ out from the cities.

A few years ago, the cities were pockets of people isolated by VC control of the countryside. Now, in the last year the countryside has been opened to more normal travel than in many years.

The railroad once was a main link between the cities. Now it is beginning to be again. Last year, 350,000 passengers braved ambush and blown bridges to ride the trains. This year the figure is two million -- nearly six times as many.

Four hundred miles of the country's seven hundred fifty miles of track are now regularly operational: twenty percent more than last year.

And more and more roads are now open and opening. Where only armed and armored convoys used to travel, civilian traffic moves freely -- by day. In the country's most populous parts, the roads are jammed. It was a dangerous adventure to drive thirty (?) miles from Saigon. In recent

months, U.S. reporters have driven great distances unescorted and unannounced around the entire Mekong Delta on main roads.

Opening the main roads is an accomplishment: opening the back roads and extending the government presence to the villages and hamlets along them is an imperative.

Until six months ago, this road -- from the district town of Giaio Duc west -- led nowhere. It ran through Viet Cong territory -- and the VC had closed it. Now it is open again, all the way to Cambodia, its blown bridges rebuilt. This may not look like a vital artery with its occasional rattletrap traffic but it is. It is a lifeline for a whole area.

What opened the road was a massive military sweep -- combined Vietnamese and U.S. ground troops backed by air and artillery.

What keeps it open are little outposts, manned mainly by local militia of the Popular Forces, placed at each bridge and by night patrolling the rice fields.

And at a key bridge, next to a newly-resettled village, there is a bigger fort, manned by troops of the Regional Forces. There we talked with Major Denis Finley senior U.S. district adviser for Giaio Duc, about "Highway 30's" history and importance.

FINLEY: This road was initially built, I believe in 19 and 62. It was closed shortly after the thing was opened. They let 'em use it for a few months, and one night simultaneously blew every bridge on the road and shut it down.

COLLINGWOOD: So for seven years, the road was closed?

FINLEY: Right.

COLLINGWOOD: And when did you open it up?

FINLEY: We opened it up about four months ago.

COLLINGWOOD: And in four months, you've kept it open, and that's what's brought the population in?

FINLEY: It certainly is. Once the people saw they could travel out here, they did. They came back home. The old man that lives right down the road there says this was the first time that he'd been home in about five years.

COLLINGWOOD: (VO) In the crowded, primitive fortress beside the road, two companies of the Regional Force are based. Their job -- to patrol the road along its length, protect the hamlets and especially the adjacent village of Than Hung. Serving and living with them is an American "mobile" advisory team, headed by Lieutenant Tony McLean.

- McLEAN: This village consists of about four thousand and three hundred and a few people.
- COLLINGWOOD: How big was it, say six months ago?
- McLEAN: It was approximately 200 people.
- COLLINGWOOD: So you've been successful in bringing it up to 4000?
- McLEAN: I would say that we have. People are coming in every day. I would say we are being successful, yes.
- COLLINGWOOD: You're out at the sharp point of the Pacification program in Vietnam. Do you think that when the United States pulls out of here, and leaves these people on their own, that they'll be able to manage and to keep going and to hold their own against the VC?
- McLEAN: I can only answer for the unit which I am advising. And I would say that the unit which I am advising could handle it. They could defeat the VC... militarily.
- COLLINGWOOD: Militarily? Well, what about the political structure, and the attitude of the peasants? Do you think that that is strong enough now to survive?
- McLEAN: I don't feel that I am qualified to answer that. I'd be afraid to answer either way.

COLLINGWOOD:
(VO)

One American who is qualified to assess the political structure is Richard Roberts, a district adviser who speaks good Vietnamese and has watched the changes here close up for more than a year.

ROBERTS:

The last several months there's been very little enemy success in the area. It's been pretty much a one-side story for the Vietnamese forces. And as long as the population is committed to it, the VC really can't make inroads back into the area.

COLLINGWOOD:

Now, is the population committed to staying in this village? Or are they committed to the government of South Vietnam?

ROBERTS:

Well, their primary allegiance is probably to the land. This is their home land, their homesteads. They've lived here for many years. Their family tombs are here, and they'd like to stay in this area. However, a great number of them did move out when the VC took over. Now they're back. So I think there's some allegiance for the Vietnamese government here.

COLLINGWOOD:

But there's still the problem of making these people think of themselves not just as citizens of Ton Hung village, but as citizens of the Republic of Vietnam?

ROBERTS:

Yes, I guess that's something that will have to come later, when they begin to realize that it's the government that's helping them to come back to their homes, and has been giving them food and housing allowances. I think the allegiance to the government will come along later.

COLLINGWOOD:
(VO)

In the effort to gain their allegiance, the government has now issued arms to the villagers of Than Hung. The villagers have accepted them. And that, in itself, is a kind of allegiance.

COLLINGWOOD:
(ON CAMERA)

By the end of this year some two million such villagers will have been signed up and issued with 350 thousand old weapons for this People's Self Defense Force, as it is called. Although 2,000 of them have been killed this year, the People's Self Defense Force is more significant politically than it is militarily. The government has to trust the people to give them arms and the people have to trust the government to accept them.

And that is very important to the government effort to identify the people with it and to extend its control around the country.

The standards used to measure "pacification" in South Vietnam are notoriously imprecise. But you don't have to believe to the last decimal point the official estimate that over 90 percent of the people now enjoy relative security from the Viet

Cong to accept that there are now a great many more such people than there used to be.

The government success in moving into Viet/Cong areas has been particularly marked in the Mekong Delta, the rich lowland where thirty-five percent of the population lives. The Delta used to be the VC heartland. It was their main recruiting base and source of support. Now Viet Cong control of the Delta -- their fiefdom for a generation -- seems to be coming unstuck.

Two years ago, two-thirds of the Delta area "belonged" to the VC or was strongly contested by them. Now, the areas they control have shrunk to seven pockets of the most inhospitable and thinly-settled parts of the region.

In the Delta, 18 months ago, the Viet Cong could draw troops from a ready reserve of nearly 360,000 young men. Now they can recruit from a base less than half as large. Instead of exporting guerillas from here to other parts of South Vietnam, they have had to import two regiments of North Vietnamese regulars -- foreigners -- here (U Minh) and here (Seven Mtns) -- to try to maintain their military balance. And there are more defectors to the government side in the Delta than in any other part of South Vietnam.

Why has this happened?

The official version is growing government strength.

A skeptical view is that the enemy is biding its time for a new strike in newly pacified areas --- to show how fragile pacification really is.

Time -- and the process which goes by the awkward name of "Vietnamization" -- will tell.

There's no place better to observe the process than in the Delta, the one area of the country where there are no longer U.S. foot soldiers.

When the American Ninth Division moved out in July, the whole responsibility on the ground was taken over by the Army of the Republic of Vietnam -- ARVN.

COLLINGWOOD (VO): At the beginning of this year, My Tho was the American garrison town in the Delta. It is still a garrison town -- but the garrison is South Vietnamese.

The armor, the trucks and other vehicles that roar through the crowded streets, the guns and even the soldiers' helmets -- the "assets" as they are called in the lingo of logistics -- are still made in the U.S.A. But the men who do the fighting on the ground are now all Vietnamese. The "assets" may be the same, but the look and the feel and the conduct of the war is changing.

Take, for example, the fire support bases west of My Tho which the Americans turned over to ARVN.

When the American Ninth Division was here, these were jammed with troops -- they were brigade bases -- bristling and businesslike. Now only a South Vietnamese battalion -- less than a third as many troops as the bases were built for -- rattle around in them.

The soldiers are not lonely, though, because they follow the accepted Vietnamese Army practice of bringing their families into the camps with them. It is hard for an American eye to get used to these scenes of on-the-job domesticity in a military outpost: it is harder, still, to judge their impact on military effectiveness.

Generally, to evaluate ARVN performance is not the easiest job. In the past, most Americans in Vietnam -- especially those who had the least contact with them -- have been scornful of the Vietnamese troops.

One thing is sure. As their combat role increases, so do their casualties. They are now dying at a rate three to four times that of the Americans each week.

And, as they carry more of the burden of fighting on the ground, most Americans who watch say they are getting better. And some say they are getting good. First Lieutenant Donald Borge has spent a year as advisor to a Seventh Division infantry battalion. We asked him if the outfit had improved.

LT. BORG:

Yes, the way he operates, his tactics have changed quite a bit. Before when I first came here, they stayed as a battalion in the field. They stayed in one tight group. Our basic information was a line formation then. Now, they're separating companies from the battalion. We've had company-size operations. They're using basic tactical formations but they're spreading out. They're searching the area better than they were as a line.

They've improved a hundred percent since I've been here.

COLLINGWOOD: What would you say their problems are as a fighting unit?

LT. BORG: As a fighting unit their problem I find is their leadership on a small level. I've been taught to expect good leadership out of squad leaders out of platoon sergeants, the ARVN doesn't have that. His company commanders are fairly good in this battalion. The battalion commander is outstanding, but below company level, it's very hard to have a small unit leadership. They're working towards this by filling smaller units on operations and expecting them to do the job and they're shaping up.

COLLINGWOOD: The Seventh Division is rated only about "average" by its observers. But it has moved in to replace its more powerful American predecessor and so far it has held its own. Its commander, General Hoang, has been criticized for caution. But he is confident.

GENERAL HOANG: I strongly believe that we are able to do everything the U.S. troops are able to do. If we get enough assets for our support, we can accomplish correctly our mission.

COLLINGWOOD: In other words, militarily, South Vietnam will be able to stand on its feet with combat support?

GENERAL HOANG: Yes.

COLLINGWOOD: What about politically, General Hoang?

GENERAL HOANG: I'm a military man, excuse me.

COLLINGWOOD: One American military man who commanded U. S. Ninth Division troops and now is senior advisor to a Vietnamese division is Colonel John Hayes. He is among the optimists. Correspondent Don Webster found when he talked to Hayes about ARVN.

WEBSTER: How is a young South Vietnamese soldier different from his American counterpart?

HAYES: Well, he's of course a small individual. I think he makes up for this by being a native of the country and able to exist very well in either the jungles, or the swamps, or the mountains.

The climatic conditions don't affect him in many ways. Such as the American soldier. I've heard the observation that he doesn't have the stamina, or staying power, I think this is a product of training.

In isolated cases, the Viet Cong have been just a better force than the South Vietnamese force they're fighting. But today, on a head-to-head basis, the Vietnamese will make contact with the Viet Cong, and they'll hang onto him, and they'll develop their tactics and defeat this force.

WEBSTER:

A year or so ago, when the South Vietnamese army was criticized, their answer then was that their weapons weren't adequate. Since then, we've given them really the best we have, M-16s and the like. Do you think it's made much difference?

HAYES:

It's made a great difference. With the addition of the M-16, we've seen a real build in the morale, it's been reflected in their tactics and capabilities.

WEBSTER:

Do you think there's maybe a chance we're making a mistake in teaching them to fight an American-style war in Asia? For example, the Viet Cong have gotten along very well without helicopters, without heavy artillery, without a lot of the things that we are teaching the South Vietnamese army to be reliant on.

HAYES:

I don't believe so. The ARVN forces now, are meeting these people on a parity; they're defeating them, they're rooting out their infrastructure. They've got these people in a position where they really are not able to utilize their main force or local force guerillas in a concerted operation. I think that's the best indication to the success of the type tactics that we're teaching them.

Now, if there was a massive influx of North

Vietnamese, and a withdrawal of support base that we're providing the South Vietnamese at this time, then there'd be some real decided difficulties. If we continue to provide them with support base: the artillery and the air they need...the North Vietnamese could bring in whatever they want. I believe in the South Vietnamese Army. It's a good army. It's well-trained, it's well motivated. With time it's going to be one of the most effective armies out here in Southeast Asia.

WEBSTER: But the question is, will they have time? How much time will it take?

HAYES: That's a beauty. You really put me on the line, there, Don. I think three years.

WEBSTER: Three more years, it will take?

HAYES: I think so.

COLLINGWOOD:

Once the official U.S. line was that Americans could do the job. Now it is that the Vietnamese can do the job. When Colonel Hayes -- a senior U.S. adviser -- says it will take ARVN three years to be ready to fight on its own, he is talking mainly about the time it will take South Vietnam to provide the various forms of combat support the U.S. is now giving Saigon.

You can see what a considerable effort in manpower that entails by looking at the Delta where all the ground fighting is now being done by the South Vietnamese. Yet there are still 23,000 American military serving here in combat support. In other words, even after all U.S. infantrymen have been pulled out of the other three corps areas, there will still be a lot of Americans left. The Americans whom the Vietnamese will be slowest to replace are those whose skills take a long time to develop -- primarily pilots and aircraft mechanics.

The south Vietnamese Army is now rated at ninety percent of its goal of expansion and modernization. The Air Force is only at half its projected strength.

COLLINGWOOD:
(VO)

This spotter plane pilot is Vietnamese. He's an old pro; he has more than two thousand hours of combat flying. His mechanic is American -- and that symbolizes the continuing Vietnamese dependence on the U.S. There are not enough trained Vietnamese mechanics, yet, to handle maintenance even for these light observation planes.

All the Forward Air Controllers in the Delta are now Vietnamese -- their job, to call in fighter planes or helicopter gun-ships - whether Vietnamese or U.S. -- in support of Vietnamese ground action.

This is a symbol of inter-dependence in the Delta air war. The Direct Air Support Center at Fourth Corps headquarters in Can Tho. Manned by Americans and South Vietnamese. It summons the air power asked for. The Vietnamese involved

are bi-lingual since the language of air command is English. From the time a ground request is relayed by Forward Air Control to this Control Center until the jets reach target is a maximum of forty-five minutes.

The spotter guides the fighters to the scene by smoke. For this mission the jets were flown by Americans. In most of the country they still are. But in the Delta more than half the air strikes are now made by Vietnamese pilots. All of them trained in the U.S. All of them experienced at their trade. Many of them at least as "hot" pilots as their American counterparts.

MAJOR HUNG: The average for the pilots in this squadron, somewhere around twelve hundred hours up to the top one is three thousand.

COLLINGWOOD: That's a lot of hours in an airplane. Were all your pilots trained in the United States?

MAJOR HUNG: Yes, sir, I would say a hundred percent. They all back from States.

COLLINGWOOD: How long will it take before the Vietnamese Air Force is ready to take over the whole burden of the war in the sky here?

MAJOR HUNG: I believe it takes approximately two to three years to get it completely, the Vietnamese Air Force, have enough pilots, I mean fighter pilots.

COLLINGWOOD: And then you'll be able to carry on the war without American help?

MAJOR HUNG: I strongly believe.

COLLINGWOOD:
(VO) Major Hung's squadron is the first in South Vietnam to be entirely equipped with U.S. jets - they fly F-5s. Their missions are flown in the Delta and in the Third Corps surrounding Saigon. Their performance is the pride of the Vietnamese Air Force - VNAF. Unless you look closely, it is not easy to tell them from their American counterparts. Except for their black Air Force combat coveralls, every item of their equipment -- helmets, oxygen masks, parachutes, flak jackets -- is American.

The trucks that take them out to the flight line are American.

The concrete revetments that protect their new American planes are of American design and are made of American cement. There are twenty supersonic jets in the squadron. But the men of Major Hung are all Vietnamese. In this squadron, all the maintenance, as well, as all the flying, has been taken over by VNAF. And there are no longer any U.S. advisors needed for a unit which has become self-sufficient.

This squadron represents the goal -- still a long time away -- toward which U.S. and South Vietnam are aiming. American commanders speak

in praise of VNAF's flying skills, when once, like Hung's squadron, they are trained and equipped.

GEN YOUNG:

The pilots that we have onboard in the Vietnamese Air Force today have perhaps more combat missions than any pilot anywhere in the world. I've flown with pilots on missions here in Vietnam that have had over forty-five hundred combat missions. They can place the bomb with the precision of a surgeon operating on a very difficult case of surgery.

The Vietnamese having fought a war as long as they have, have developed with their current force, a very professional group of people.

COLLINGWOOD:
(ON CAMERA)

Man for man the South Vietnamese Air Force is probably the best of their armed services. But it simply doesn't have enough people to do the job that the United States has been doing. It now has a thousand pilots; it needs 2,000. It takes a long time to produce a pilot, or an efficient manager of the complex logistical and maintenance processes an air force must have if it is to fly.

The whole process of Vietnamization began very late in the day and we're now trying desperately to make up for lost time in every field. In the nature of things, we can catch up quickest with the infantry -- it doesn't take long to train a rifleman. But it takes two years to train an aircraft mechanic.

COLLINGWOOD (VO): Here, at Bien Hoa airbase near Saigon you can see both the progress -- and the problem. The mechanics here have been trained to work on the whole range of planes the U.S. has given the Vietnamese Air Force. These men are good mechanics. They can handle any kind of aircraft engine, from those used on the lumbering propeller-driven A-1s, which are still their air force staple, to the new jet engines. Virtually all the maintenance for that jet squadron of Major Hung's is done here.

But the problem is there aren't enough men like this. And complicating the problem of flying, and repairing, planes and engines and the other sophisticated U.S. equipment is that all the instruction manuals are in English -- and there are no equivalent words in Vietnamese for most of the technical terms and tools. So a major -- and time-consuming -- task of training is to teach the Vietnamese English.

(TRACK UP ON LANGUAGE CLASS, THEN UNDER.)

This is the biggest specialized training program of all. In this one school in central Saigon, there are seventeen hundred trainees at a time. Here the Americans are not just advisers, but instructors.

Those trainees who are later to go to the U.S. for flight instructions get thirty weeks of English here first. Only some of it rubs off.

(TRACK UP ON VIETNAMESE SPEAKING ENGLISH)

The American in charge of co-ordinating the whole troop training program with the Vietnamese high command is Colonel Edward Mayer. I asked how many Americans are involved in the program.

COL. MAYER:

Well, we have a considerable number in the English language school because we actually teach there, but in the other camps and schools we have about two hundred and thirty-five.

COLLINGWOOD: Is that enough?

COL. MAYER: I don't think so.

COLLINGWOOD: Do you think you're going to get more?

COL. MAYER: Yes, I do. This is the program I think, that is getting the attention now that it deserves.

COLLINGWOOD (VO): There are currently about a hundred thousand Vietnamese at a time in training in thirty-three different training centers and twenty-five service schools throughout the country. And two hundred thirty-five Americans to advise -- and supervise.

This is the Engineering School at Binh Duong. Its present enrollment is about twelve hundred. Colonel Mayer judges this to be one of the better schools.

These are the future military engineers of South Vietnam. Bright enough, ready enough to learn, but most of these young men never even saw complicated machinery in the rural hamlets where they grew up.

"Discipline is the strength of the Army," says the sign at Vietnam's biggest ordinance repair depot.

But the greatest material strength of the Vietnamese military remains the "assets" with the signs "United States of America."

This already amounts to one-and-a-half billion dollars worth. And much more to come.

Giving them the equipment is one thing. For the Vietnamese to maintain it is another.

Vehicle engine maintenance is second nature to Americans brought up in the age of the engine. Before the war, Vietnam lived in the age of the ox -- and this is something new. They must learn -- and do -- at the same time. And time is short.

This armor repair shop is roomy, well-equipped, spit-and-polish clean. But it is critically undermanned. The depot employs some twelve hundred people, military and civilian.

The U.S. advisers here say the depot could easily employ twice as many. But the pay is low -- and the reservoir of skills is lower still.

Here is a potential delay to the timetable. The whole process of turning the war over to South Vietnam, on the front lines and in the rear, is time-consuming and often frustrating. The basic question is: when the process is complete, can South Vietnam do the job?

COL. MAYER:

Well, I think the best way to answer that Mr. Collingwood, is the fact that we have equipped them and trained with them that their forces are

better equipped and better trained than their NVA or VC adversary. And the rest will have to be up to them. Motivation and desire.

COLLINGWOOD:

And what's your own guess about that?

COL. MAYER:

They have every capability of doing anything that they want to do or put their mind to doing.

COLLINGWOOD ON
CAMERA

In Saigon, there's a cynic's answer to the question: "How can the United States get out of Vietnam?"

The answer is: "By plane and boat".

That, presumably, could be done in a few months.

And South Vietnam would be almost sure to collapse.

So, giving the South Vietnamese a chance to preserve and protect their independence requires American departure at a slower pace. From what we saw, and heard, and could judge, that time table seems to work out like this:

We will end this year with some 480,000 Americans in Vietnam. Without exposing the Vietnamese army to defeat, the U.S. next year can hope to pull out another 150,000 to 200,000 ground troops and most of our combat navy. That would leave some 290,000 Americans.

In the six months after that, so goes the timetable, the remaining U.S. ground forces and some from the other services could head home. That would leave, by mid-1971 about 150,000 Americans in Vietnam.

Since they would not be in ground combat, U.S. casualties would thereafter be minimal. In the Delta now, for instance, only a few Americans are killed each week. Mid-1972 appears to be the earliest possible date by which the South Vietnamese can replace nearly one hundred-thirty thousand U.S. pilots, maintenance men and logisticians.

Thereafter, it is contemplated that a corps of American advisors -- perhaps 20,000 or more -- will be needed in Vietnam for years to come. That, in a short-hand version, is the timetable which U.S. and Vietnamese planners hope to keep to. As it is constructed, it only gives South Vietnam a chance to survive.

It does not guarantee survival.

That depends, to a major degree, on the political performance of the Saigon government. It is only in the past year the Thieu regime has tried to gain popularity. It has not done so by seeking to broaden its base among the political parties. With some justification, it has argued few of the parties have much of a national base. What it is now trying to do is win favor at the local level. By making funds available for community projects in the villages and hamlets. And by establishing democratic rule in them.

COLLINGWOOD (V.O.) This is the key to the government's current efforts at broadening its base of support. This is a training school for hamlet and village chiefs, and other top local officials. These are the key men if the "hearts and minds" of the country are to be won.

By year's end, seventeen thousand men will have gone through school here; next year another nine

thousand village and hamlet officials are scheduled for training. Among the most important lessons: how to conduct elections for local posts. Elections have now been conducted, for the first time, in more than 85% of South Vietnam's hamlets. The goal is free elections, regularly, in all of them.

Presiding over the school, and here over graduating ceremonies, is one of South Vietnam's most dedicated men, Colonel Nguyen Be. Be is also head of the Rural Development School, a former province official, and an arch-foe of Vietnamese official corruption, which he still feels saps the country's vitality. But this articulate skeptic is encouraged by the trend toward local democracy, as he indicated to George Syvertson:

SYVERTSON: Colonel, is this hamlet training program just window dressing, or is it a real step toward democracy?

COL. BE: Yes, this is a real step toward democracy, because on this training, we really train people how to be the real boss in their community.

SYVERTSON: Do you think that the peasants now, really have any sense of identification with the central government?

COL. BE:

I feel that the more we train the village and hamlet officials, the more the people will have their identification with the Saigon government.

COLLINGWOOD:

That identification of the people with the Saigon government is the key to its survival, and possibly to the survival of South Vietnam itself. As things stand, the government still draws real strength from the armed forces, not from the people. Dominated by generals, elected by only 35% of the vote, still given to the imprisonment of its opponents, bitterly opposed to any coalition with its enemies, the Saigon regime is regarded by many as the principal obstacle to a peace settlement. Others see it not only as the best of available alternatives, but as beginning at last to move toward democracy, efficiency and nation-building. Certainly, President Thieu realizes, intellectually, at least, that winning the people has become as important as winning battles. He gets around the country more than any other South Vietnamese President has ever done. At least once a week he goes politicking to one province or another. We accompanied him on one of these trips which took him first to Soc Trang, the capital of Ba Xuyen province in the Delta.

By Western political standards, President Thieu is not much of a glad-hander -- a little stiff as he mingles with the crowd. But in Vietnamese terms this counts as folksy informality.

Traditionally, a Vietnamese chief of state remained aloof and was treated with great deference. Even now, meeting so great a personage face to face can be rather a shock -- especially to those old enough to remember other days and other manners. It is the local authorities job to drum up a big crowd for the President, and a well-arranged formal ceremony of this kind is hardly a gauge of the popularity of President Thieu and his government.

Nevertheless, I was present at a precisely similar ceremony here in Soc Trang four years ago when Air Marshal Ky was running the country and his audience was neither as large nor as friendly as this one for President Thieu. Certainly Thieu leaves no stone unturned to make an impression on the local people.

He is lavish in the distribution of medals to everyone from hamlet militia to local leaders. He gives landless tenant farmers title to their land.

Little roto-tillers, one man tractors, are wheeled out to go to particularly deserving rice farmers.

This is bread and butter stuff, but Thieu does not neglect the spiritual side of the community either.

Although a Catholic himself, he pays a respectful visit to Soc Trang's ornate Buddhist pagoda, marching under a crimson parasol, accompanied by the most venerable monks and abbots.

A decent regard for religion is at least as important to a Vietnamese politician as it is to an American politician. In their changing world, the Vietnamese see the ancient rituals as a symbol of that continuity that is increasingly frayed by the abrasion of war.

Another way to identify with common people, as every American President knows, is to show an interest in sport. The Delta folk have been racing sampans since the dawn of time, and they turned out their best crews to compete under the Presidential eye.

It didn't hurt President Thieu a bit with the local sports lovers that he clambered down the bank to congratulate the winning boats.

Then, touching every base, the President and his entourage went out to inspect a village, a rich one by Vietnamese standards, and enjoying the advantage of being relatively secure.

In the new high school, he was briefed by local leaders on what they were doing... and asked them sharp questions.

(THIEU ASKS QUESTIONS IN VIETNAMESE)

In the end he seemed pleased with what he had found.

THIEU:

The most important thing, I have checked in here, is not only the administration's side, but the self-development by the people itself. So you can see the three things that the people in this village have made themselves in the sense, in the spirit of the self-development of the village. The electric power plant, the high school, the irrigation canal.

So it is most important, the contribution of the people itself to develop his own village.

Not to demand everything from the government.

The government from now will not give everything, the government will help....But it can't do everything.

COLLINGWOOD (VO):

An experimental rice field was his final stop as President Thieu put in a full day of campaigning in the American style. The people of the Delta may not love him yet, but at least they are learning who he is. Way behind schedule now, Thieu soared off in a waiting helicopter.

COLLINGWOOD:
(ON CAMERA)

According to President Nixon, South Vietnam's President Nguyen Van Thieu is one of the five greatest statesmen in the world. This estimate is by no means universally accepted in South Vietnam where Thieu has not yet succeeded in creating a wide base of public support. It should be said that the National Liberation

Front and Vietcong do not have a wide base of public support, either. As far as a reporter can judge, the NLF would get no more than 20% of the vote if an honest election were to be held tomorrow. Thieu's officially-tolerated opposition, and it is strong though fragmented, seeks to mobilize all those in between the Communists and the government, accusing the government of inefficiency and all manner of undemocratic sins.

Thieu can hardly be expected to agree with his critics. He insists his government is gaining strength both militarily and politically. I talked to him at the Presidential Palace in Saigon.

PRESIDENT THIEU:

Even though we progress slowly, but we have progressed very surely. And I am very pleased with the results of the pacification and the reconstruction program. I am very pleased with the building of the democracy on the village and hamlet level. And finally, I am very pleased with the progress of the development and efficiency of the Vietnamese Army.

We can say that what we have replaced as American fighting troops have no effect at all on the pacification and the security of the territory. And we are determined and we are

willing to take more responsibility and to replace more fighting troops next year.

COLLINGWOOD:

Are you concerned, Mr. President, that the pressure of American public opinion may cause too rapid a withdrawal.

THIEU:

At first I don't believe that it's the majority of the U.S. people will press the U.S. government to withdraw fast -- so fast and to abandon Vietnam. But I would like also to ask the U.S. people, the whole U.S. people to be patient, and to give enough time to President Nixon to Vietnamize the war.

COLLINGWOOD:

Mr. President, looking back on it now, and taking a long view, do you think that in the long run, the American involvement in the war in South Vietnam here, has been a good thing, or a bad thing for South Vietnam?

THIEU:

That depends upon you on your side. You are determined to sincerely and to honestly help the Vietnamese people defend his independence and his freedom.

And so the story in Vietnam will say that the United States people have helped sincerely and honestly the Vietnamese people to defend freedom. It's a good page of Vietnamese history. Now if you abandon Vietnam, and if you scuttle and run,

certainly it's a very bad page of history. It depends on you.

COLLINGWOOD:
(ON CAMERA)

From the time we plunged blindly into the war in Vietnam until now, as we try painfully to pick our way out, there has been one consistent United States war aim. That is that at the end South Vietnam should have a chance to determine its own future.

The timetable for American withdrawal which I have been describing tonight is geared to that goal. It stretches, at an accelerating pace, from now until well into 1972. This is hardly a high-speed journey toward U.S. disengagement.

But if we are to preserve for the South Vietnamese their chance to stand on their own feet, it is difficult to see how the timetable can be speeded up significantly. It may not even be met.

However, there is one thing on which most people in South Vietnam now agree -- Americans and Vietnamese alike. It is time the Americans start going home. The law of diminishing returns has set in. 500,000 Americans may have saved South Vietnam from Communism, but their indefinitely continued presence could destroy what they sought to save.

The Song My massacre is only one of the most hideous examples of what it does to both parties. I cannot tell you whether the timetable we have outlined will leave South Vietnam secure and independent -- no one can. All that can be done is to create the conditions under which survival is possible by the efforts of the South Vietnamese. It is this reporter's conclusion after a month in Vietnam, after many previous visits to Vietnam, that those conditions now exist and that there is a fighting chance that the timetable can work. From now on, though, it is the South Vietnamese who will have to do most of the fighting. That is what we said we wanted all along. President Nixon says it now.

Six years ago, before the United States made a massive commitment of life, of treasure, of -- so it came to seem -- sacred honor, President Kennedy said it.

JOHN F. KENNEDY:

I don't think that unless a greater effort is made by the government to win popular support that the war can be won out there. In the final analysis, it's their war. They're the ones who have to win it or lose it. We can help them. We can give them equipment. We can send our men out there as advisers, but they have to win it, the people of Vietnam against the Communists.