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Gen. Walt: U.S. Underestimates

WASHINGTON (AP) — Calling himself naive, Marine Corps Gen. Lewis W. Walt said Wednesday he and other American leaders were overly optimistic early in the Vietnam war because "we didn't appreciate the importance of the guerrilla."

"This was a brand new war and we didn't recognize it," said Walt, who led U.S. Marines in Vietnam for more than two years. Now assistant commandant, he will retire from the Corps in February.

Those who were over optimistic, he said, were thinking of World War II and Korea-type conflicts and didn't understand "you just can't go in and wipe out" guerrillas.

"When I got out there I didn't understand this war," Walt told newsmen at a Pentagon briefing where he said he found in a recent visit that the Viet Cong guerrilla threat now is "pretty well in hand."

The four-star general said that when he first arrived in Vietnam in 1965 it took him six months to find out what the war was all about, and that he had to get out into the villages and hamlets to learn for himself.

To illustrate "how naive I was," Walt told of spending an hour talking with a village official and ending up feeling good about the situation.

However, the Marine general said, he soon felt a woman tugging at him as she put a paper in his hand—and the paper told him that the village official who had given him such a cheering report actually was the No. 1 Viet Cong in the settlement.

"It took a while to catch on, to learn how to fight that war," Walt said, adding that the Marines eventually found out they had to win the people over.

Looking back, Walt indicated he feels the war could have been shortened if the American people could have been made to

understand better and if U.S. military men had been allowed to shut off the port of Haiphong as an inlet of Communist supplies to North Vietnam.

Lack of understanding was not the fault of the American people, the general added.

"We in the military didn't define the war in the terms we should have," he said.

Surveying the situation as it is now, Walt said, he is "even more optimistic than before" about the eventual success of Vietnamization.

"Things are going exceptionally well—much better than a year ago," he said.

The biggest improvement is in the South Vietnamese regional forces and popular forces, he said, claiming that these militia elements are "really getting out and fighting the enemy—and they are successful."

At present, Walt said, the Viet Cong guerrilla capacity is less

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than 10 per cent of what it was five years ago in the critical northern provinces of South Vietnam.

In the rest of the country as well, Walt said, the "guerrilla is nothing compared to what he was."

The biggest remaining threat, he said, comes from the North Vietnamese ability to send troops across the Demilitarized Zone or from sanctuaries in Laos against the two northernmost provinces of South Vietnam.