

*SLC Papers of  
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BUILDING A POLITICALLY VIABLE SOUTH VIET-NAM

1. The Present Situation

Despite the attrition of more than twenty years of struggle, there still exists in South Viet-Nam the potential to build and sustain a free nation. On the other hand, the South Vietnamese Government is not yet capable of meeting the Communist political challenge, at the conference table or in the countryside. Serious vulnerabilities exist to which South Viet-Nam may well succumb. The coming year will be climactic in determining whether South Viet-Nam can become politically viable. In this process the U.S. will inevitably play a critical role. At present, the prospects for South Viet-Nam successfully confronting its Communist enemies are not bright, as much because of American vulnerabilities as because of Vietnamese failings.

Potential Strengths

The South Vietnamese have created a constitutional framework for government which most of the non-communist nationalist leadership accepts. Its main institutions, the Presidency, the National Assembly, the Courts and the Village and City Councils have been established and are beginning to function. The relationship between the South Vietnamese Government and its people has improved as a result of the constitutional process. The Constitution is essentially fair and democratic; and offers a sound basis for any future political settlement with the Communists.

In the last year, especially since the Communist Tet offensive, there has been a trend toward national unity among South Vietnamese nationalists. This has manifested itself in the establishment of a broad political front, the Lien Minh, which has had the backing of President Thieu and the majority

of the political groupings in the country. The Front's organizational activities have been limited, however, and it remains a potential political force without an enthusiastic, broadly based following.

At the grass-roots in Viet-Nam non-communist political, religious and ethnic groups exist which total some four to five million in population. These groups include the Catholics, some of the Buddhists, the Hoa Hao, the Cao Dai, the Kmer, the Montagnards, the Chinese and the VNQDD and Dai Viet political parties. Most of these groups are not merely non-communist, but anti-communist. Unfortunately, many have remained fractured internally and have been unable to firmly unite at the national level with other groups. Nor do they owe truly firm allegiance to the National Government.

A hard core of resistance to Communism remains widespread among the Vietnamese people. The Vietnamese are amazingly resilient, still full of energy and fight. In their history, they have always been able to unite to cope with some major threat or disaster. They responded not only centuries ago, but in 1946 against the French and to a large degree under Diem at the beginning of his regime in 1954-56. A well of patriotism exists among all Vietnamese, not only the Viet-Cong; but it still remains to be tapped in an inspired and positive fashion by the present leadership.

Despite the systematic attempt by the Communists to eliminate all non-communist, nationalist leaders, dedicated and honest leaders remain in all groups and at all levels in the country. It is this leadership group, despite its lack of national unity, which has sustained the struggle. They exist in the Army, the Government, the National Assembly, in the various religious and ethnic groups, and in some of the political parties and labor

unions. With inspiration from the top, these leaders have the capability of uniting the country for political confrontation with the Communists.

#### Vulnerabilities

In estimating the political strength of the Vietnamese Government, it should be understood that the Government's link with the people is essentially weak, because it neither serves nor effectively defends most of its people. The Government does not really govern South Viet-Nam. It remains too weak, too corrupt and too unresponsive to represent a cause to the majority worth fighting for. Using U.S. Government reports as a basis, some 48% of the total population lives in contested areas or hamlets in which a VC infrastructure exists. Adding this 48% to the 17% estimated to be living in VC controlled areas gives an overall figure of 65% of the population subject to some VC control. Breaking the figures down in another way, out of a total population of fourteen million, about four million are governed by the Vietnamese Government and are relatively secure from enemy action, about three million are under VC control, and about seven million are subject to both Government and VC activity, of which VC activity can be considered to be the most effective.

Although a constitutional framework exists in South Viet-Nam, the sense of unity, inspired leadership and the viable political organizations needed to convert the Constitution into a political cause, are still missing. The sense of urgency on the part of the Vietnamese to supply these missing ingredients has, until recently, been lacking, while time in which to supply them has been radically shortened by the Paris talks and American public opinion.

South Vietnamese leadership remains uninspiring. President Thieu is

not a strong, symbolic leader, either to the insiders in the power structure or to the people; and he has consolidated his position more on the basis of personal relationships and self-interest than on an open appeal to the better leadership elements based on the national interest. At the same time he has shown some capacity to grow; and his recent opposition to the U.S. on the Paris talks has probably broadened his appeal and support more than any other single act since taking office. Thieu's entourage and his power base contain corrupt elements which vitiate his effectiveness. Thieu has not yet shown the capacity to get the wholehearted participation of other nationalist leaders in a cooperative effort to achieve national unity. It remains unclear as to whether he possesses such a capacity.

In terms of a political confrontation with the Viet Cong, the Vietnamese Nationalists have no national political organization to match the one hundred thousand man, Communist, Peoples Revolutionary Party (PRP). Elements of a broadly based nationalist political organization exist among some of the political, religious and ethnic groups but the necessary unity at the top does not. Personal survival and protection of family, village, religious or ethnic group remains the primary motive for fighting.

Without effective political organization, the non-communists leadership group at the lower levels is vulnerable to fears of an ultimate sell-out by its own top leadership, who are known to possess the means to get out. In this conjunction, the credibility of the U.S. commitment plays a particularly critical role. The lower leadership levels cannot be expected to sustain the struggle if it becomes clear that the Vietnamese nationalists are being forced into a coalition government out of which they can only emerge the sure losers.

The relationship between the U.S. and the Vietnamese Nationalists has already been marred by consistent misunderstandings on both sides. The credibility of the U.S. commitment is now sharply in doubt. Gradual de-Americanization of the war appears possible without inducing either panic or mistrust, if a mutual basis of understanding can be re-established. Whether this can be done will depend more on U.S. leadership, than on the Vietnamese, whose flexibility and understanding of us is limited by the simple fact that their survival is directly at stake. Given the existence of strong Vietnamese feelings that the elevation of the NLF to equal status at Paris is an irretrievable step towards coalition government and the sure loss of their country, this may be the greatest vulnerability of all in the present situation.

## 2. The Objectives

The main objective of political development in South Viet-Nam, and American support for this development, must be to build a politically viable South Viet-Nam capable of politically confronting the Communists. The effort to attain this objective may be divided into two major lines of endeavor, to make the present Constitution work so that it becomes a viable framework within which a political confrontation can be carried out; and to develop a truly grass roots, nationalist political organization.

Particular stress should be placed on the preservation and strengthening of the present Constitution because it represents the genesis of a common cause for the Vietnamese nationalists. The more its principles can be put into action, the more it will embody what the Vietnamese want, which is essentially democracy. Moreover, without the Constitution, South Viet-Nam

would again slip back into political chaos. For this reason the Constitution must be preserved in any future political confrontation with the Communists, as difficult as it will be to get them to accept, for example, participating in Lower House elections as a first step in a political accommodation.

We should also keep in mind that political development towards viability in South Viet-Nam must be tied in with our negotiating position with the North Vietnamese, and the Viet Cong, in any peace negotiations. This bargaining position must be based on a realistic assessment of what can and cannot be conceded in any political settlement, if the eventual political confrontation is to be at least an even contest.

### 3. Actions to Strengthen South Viet-Nam Politically

The key to success in strengthening the Vietnamese Nationalists for their political confrontation with the Communists lies in getting them to take actions based essentially on their ideas and plans, not on American ideas. We can encourage them and in some cases pressure them, and we can help create the right climate for positive changes and reform; but we cannot take these actions ourselves.

The first thing that needs to be done is for the U.S. to convince the Vietnamese that we still have faith in them, and that our agreement to permit the NLF to come to Paris, is not a disguised surrender, or an inevitable step towards coalition government. If we can succeed in doing that, the next step will be to get the Vietnamese leadership out in contact with lower echelon officials and officers reassuring these leaders, who are in direct contact with the people, that the struggle must and will go on. Otherwise, what exists in the way of a 'spirit of sacrifice and will to resist is likely to

ooze away at the local level where it counts the most.

We cannot rely on President Thieu alone for this kind of leadership because he does not yet possess a sufficiently wide base of support. It will require the participation of other leaders with regional followings such as General Minh in the south, General Thi in the center and a number of religious and political leaders.

At the same time, we must give reassurance to the Vietnamese in such a way that it acts as a stimulant to their sense of urgency and self-reliance. This is difficult to do without overpandering to Vietnamese vulnerabilities on the one hand, or creating genuine resentment and mistrust on the other. A gradual American withdrawal which creates self-confidence, rather than panic, must be carefully orchestrated from both Saigon and Washington with a regard for Vietnamese sensitivities which we have not yet demonstrated. This will call for a reorganization of the American effort in both Washington and Saigon to make it more responsive to the President and more understanding of Vietnamese sensitivities and problems.

Unless we learn how better to handle our relations with the Vietnamese and stimulate the political development needed to face up to the Viet Cong, we seem almost certain to lose the coming phase of the continuing Viet-Nam struggle.

In addition to shoring up morale, there are a number of other actions, which are within the capabilities of the leaders of South Viet-Nam, which could measurably strengthen their government, and which would help to coalesce nationalist political forces into a more unified and determined whole. These actions may be, and in most cases should be, lead by President Thieu but their

success will depend on the participation of many others in what is essentially a diffused and confused power structure.

Among those actions which should receive consideration in the political strengthening of South Viet-Nam are the following:

a. Developing National Leadership

Viet-Nam needs more dynamic and open leadership from President Thieu. His cautiousness and lack of frankness have made it difficult for him to obtain support and cooperation from other nationalist leaders. He has yet to establish the widespread trust in himself which would help cement the nationalists together. He should broaden his own personal staff to include Vietnamese of recognized integrity who are not Dai Viet or Catholics. He should also broaden the political base of his Government by either inviting some of the respected liberals or moderates, such as Tran Van Tuyen, Phan Quang Dan and perhaps Au Truong Thanh into the Government or get them to participate in the Nationalist front, the Lien Minh. Of particular importance would be to obtain the active participation of General Duong Van Minh in some meaningful role.

In any case, Thieu's tendencies to narrow the circle of people upon whom he depends, and to utilize semi-clandestine political methods reminiscent of the Can Lao, must be counteracted by encouraging him, and pressuring him where necessary to reach out to other nationalist leaders to get them involved in constructive political actions towards common goals.

One particular troublesome problem which undermines Thieu's attempts at leadership is corruption within his own power base, particularly among the Corps and Division Commanders in the Army and the Province Chiefs, and also among some members of his own immediate entourage. Thieu must be both encouraged and pressured into the systematic elimination of senior corrupt officials and their replacement by honest men who may not necessarily be old friends or fellow companions during his military school days.

b. Establishing National Goals

At present, the only well defined and agreed upon goal of the nationalists is to defeat the Communists. This is not a sufficient cause on which to build a nation. In order to encourage team work and unity among the Vietnamese it will be necessary to develop positive national political goals, based upon the principles stated in the Constitution, and common bonds which have popular appeal to all political/religious groups, civil service and military personnel. The Vietnamese must know what they are fighting for before a real sense of unity develops.

We should encourage President Thieu in cooperation with other nationalist leaders to establish a Vietnamese Commission on National Goals. This Commission would draft in plain language those goals for which people would be willing to fight and to publicize these goals both

domestically and internationally. We should also encourage the Prime Minister and the cabinet to revise (and rigorously enforce) the codes of conduct for both civil service and military personnel, in accordance with these goals. The Commission would also provide a positive channel for a number of Nationalists who are not currently usefully employed.

c. De-Americanizing our Assistance

So far most proposals for the de-Americanization of our effort in Viet-Nam have been couched in terms of U.S. troop withdrawal. There is an equally important and positive part of this endeavor, which is the restoration of Vietnamese political sovereignty in the eyes of their own people by cutting down on the size of the American advisory effort, both civilian and military. As previously pointed out, if handled tactfully, this can act as a spur to create a sense of political urgency in the Vietnamese.

If there is to be an effective cut-back, not only should the numbers of advisors be reduced but the vast bureaucratic staffs in Saigon and the Regions should be cut, and in some cases, eliminated.

Experience has shown on Taiwan that for the kind of grass-roots action and agricultural revolution needed in Viet-Nam to give an economic underpinning to democratic political development, the Joint Commission approach is much more effective because it would be largely untrammeled by both the U.S. and Vietnamese Government bureaucracies.

Establishment of the Commission might best be handled through

enabling legislation passed by the National Assembly. If enabling legislation is not required then approval of the concept should be the subject of a joint upper and lower House resolution, if possible, in order to give its launching a concensus of Vietnamese support.

This Commission would have a majority of Vietnamese Commissioners, thus preserving and enhancing Vietnamese sovreignty. Funds and commodities would be turned over to the Commission for use, without being restricted by the time consuming and often self-defeating rules and regulations of AID.

The Commission could also begin to plan for future civilian development of such massive U. S. installations as Cam Ranh Bay. And it could better serve to coordinate private U. S. assistance in the cultural and educational fields, than the present AID Mission.

It is estimated that by utilizing such an approach the present AID Mission could be cut in size by as much as 80%. At the same time the Vietnamese Government would still receive the assistance it needed to function, but would be given room in which to do its job free of the political liability of an overwhelming American presence.

Conversion of the Joint Commission into a multi-national body would provide a sensible means of further scaling down the U. S. presence; and it could serve as the ideal focus for the phasing in of participation in Vietnamese development by such international institutions as the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank.

d. Improving Pacification

Pacification, or Revolutionary Development as it is called in Viet-Nam, is an essential part of building a politically viable nation. While a unified national political front or party may provide the spark and unity needed to confront the Communists at the polls, a sound pacification program is necessary to provide the security which the political front or party needs to operate.

Revolutionary Development within the Vietnamese Government is well-staffed at the national level, but needs a more forceful and dynamic push from the top. It's present chief, Deputy Minister Hoang Van Lac, is able and experienced, but cannot supply this leadership alone. Revolutionary Development also has a good training center and some 800 cadre teams in the field. Major problems are a lack of leadership in the teams and at the District and Province levels of Government, lack of proper coordination between military security forces and team operations and a tendency to push the teams for results beyond their capabilities.

An example of the latter is the accelerated pacification effort now underway which has set unrealistic targets for achievement, and if implemented as currently envisaged, with many teams being moved out of their present work areas, is likely to leave already pacified hamlets open to VC reentry. Experience in Viet-Nam has consistently shown that pacification is only effective if it is thorough and methodical. Hasty efforts in the past, beginning with the emphasis on numbers during the Diem era, have consistently returned to haunt us.

It would be better to concentrate on what has already been pacified

until local self-government and political organization can be gotten on its feet, and to continue the present rate of progress.

The U.S. should continue to use CORDS to support pacification. However, as an instrument, it needs critical re-examination both in the field and in Saigon to be certain that it becomes truly effective (which it is not at present). If it were to be abolished, some other joint U.S. organization would have to be formed as a substitute. The main failings of CORDS have been that it is overstaffed, inherently insensitive to the Vietnamese, and has too often attempted to direct rather than work with the Vietnamese.



## e. Strengthening Local Government and Local Elections

The Constitution provides for a system of local elections in the provinces, without spelling out details. Local government is still the government which is the most understandable to the Vietnamese, and they tend to judge the national government and the whole question of a cause worth fighting for by the actions and the quality of the local government which they experience first hand. Village elections have taken place, but the powers of the villages are still too limited and the system beyond the village remains too arbitrary and unresponsive the the full effect of local elections to be felt.

President Thieu and the National Assembly should be encouraged to develop and pass legislation for an improved system of local government in the provinces and in the cities and city neighborhoods, which provides for real decentralization of power and which also provides for a progressive system of elections from the village on up through the province level. There are provinces in Viet-Nam, such as An Giang, which are sufficiently pacified to permit elections for district chief and for province chief. Such elections now, even on a limited scale, would help generate real popular support for the Government by making the aspirations of the Constitution ring true.

Along with the local government bill, a progressive plan for Neighborhood and Village Advancement could also be established. The plan would describe several categories of villages and urban neighborhoods, based

upon evidence of the people's will and ability to help themselves for their own advancement. Neighborhoods and villages judged most able to help themselves would be given preferential treatment - in executive powers for their elected councils, in use of tax monies, and in direct aid and credit for public works and cooperative ventures - as a reward for demonstrating their self-reliance. This reward would thus become a prize sought after by other neighborhoods and villages in lower categories. The direct aid or credit portion of this reward could be immediately channeled to the recipient neighborhood or village by the Joint Vietnamese American Commission thus increasing the psychological and political impact of the plan.

The government would be authorized to create a National Board for Neighborhood and Village Advancement to determine the rating of each urban neighborhood and village. Board membership, along with government officials, would include a proportioned number of representatives of major nationalist parties. The system would permit President Thieu to stimulate the unification of political groupings who would have majority representation on such a board - with its visits and ties to elected village and neighborhood councils. Or alternatively, if such a Board could not be authorized, a joint Senate and Lower House Committee could be established to monitor the plan's implementation.

#### Improving the System of Justice

The present system of justice is arbitrary and out of reach of the

average Vietnamese. The lack of justice in the social and political system is a serious deterrent to the development of belief in the country's Constitution and present form of government. This is a long neglected area of concern. Tremendous numbers of people are detained over long periods without trial and there is an enormous back-log of untried cases. A start has been made to reform and strengthen the system by the recent election by the National Assembly of a Supreme Court. What is needed now is an effective reinvigoration and decentralization of the system down to levels which touch the people. Specifically some type of circuit court system and the investiture of local "justices of the peace" are needed in the provinces. At the same time special councils could be created in the villages, with limited legal powers, to settle land disputes through the traditional Vietnamese method of arbitration and compromise.

Strengthening the legal system and thereby justice in the South Viet-Nam would also provide an opportunity for meaningful participation by and assistance from private American groups such as the American Bar Association and the Legal Aid Societies.

In addition, the Inspectorate, which is a kind of ombudsman "fourth power" under the Constitution, and which has just been established should be encouraged to begin functioning as rapidly as possible. President Thieu should support its operations and see that it is provided with adequate transportation and access to the provinces. Government officials

should be directed to cooperate with the Inspectorate's investigations.

If vigorously and fairly run, the Inspectorate would provide a channel for citizen complaints, which does not now exist, thus further strengthening the system of justice.

**7. Achieving Nationalist Unity**

This is probably the most difficult task of all, but is probably also one of the most essential. Providing more dynamic and open leadership, jointly establishing national goals and participating in putting local government on its feet will all contribute to unification. However, perhaps the most persuasive force of all, will be the coming realization that the National Liberation Front will have to be eventually faced at the polls; and that the presentation of a series of splinter candidates on the Nationalist side will result in certain defeat. In any case, achieving unity will be difficult. We should continue to encourage the development of a common political front, such as the Lien Minh, by encouraging Thieu to give it genuine support and by encouraging other leaders with followings, such as General Minh, to join in.

The U. S. could better assist in this effort if it had better knowledge of the strengths of existing nationalist leaders, cadre forces and followings in each area in Viet-Nam. We should proceed to systematically develop such knowledge.

Order to build his own political party. U. S. addressed to  
in the future should be limited to soft drinks, beer and  
tumds, in this with our people to help the  
line up to their own constitutional principles.

## b. Nationalist Party Development

Action to develop Nationalist parties is intimately related to the question of the unity of nationalist leaders and groups. This is a difficult, tricky and complicated area. Every creation of a new party in Viet-Nam seems to generate a further splintering of National forces, rather than a coalescing of these forces. Most parties have a personal rather than ideological base. For President Thieu to try to create his own personal party at present would result in a narrowly based organization, depending primarily on government functionaries and probably possessing a built-in clandestine control apparatus similar to the Can Lao of the Diem era.

Above all, the mistakes of the Diem era must not be repeated.

In view of the coming political confrontation with the Communists, which may occur within perhaps a year's time the best line of endeavor would seem to be to encourage most of the nationalist groups to coalesce behind the longest existing political front, the Lien Minh. To make this work, new blood would have to be pumped into the Lien Minh. Its future role would have to be better understood by its members and better explained to the general public than in the past. The Lien Minh would also have to come up with a series of programs which would get the various nationalist leaders working together on non-partisan causes and activities.

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### Depoliticizing Religious Organizations

President Thieu could make significant political gains if he announced that henceforth there would be religious freedom for all people in Viet-Nam and that religious organizations would no longer be required to register with the government. This would also serve to depoliticize the role of religious organizations whose factions are continuously competing for recognition and support of the government. The value of this would substantially outweigh the loss of control through registration which has never been effectively implemented. We should encourage President Thieu to ask the National Assembly to pass a Charter of Religious Freedom.

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### Appealing to Youth

The Vietnamese Government has attempted to suppress and control youth and student organizations rather than to encourage their participation in constructive activities. The new requirement of the Ministry of Culture, Education, and Youth for all student organizations to register with the government will further alienate relations. We should encourage the Prime Minister and Minister of Culture, Education, and Youth to repeal the directive ordering the registration of student organizations. We should also encourage the President, Prime Minister, Cabinet Members, and National Assembly Members to meet with youth and student leaders to discuss national problems and develop programs for their participation. A quasi-government/private council should be established to coordinate

and support private youth and student activities, replacing the Directorate for Youth under the Ministry of Culture, Education and Youth. This would provide an effective channel for private U.S. assistance.

## **K. Improving the National Assembly**

Except in a few cases, effective communication lines do not exist between the National Assembly members and their constituencies. Given the system by which the Upper House was elected, there is little hope in developing meaningful relationships between Senators and the people. However, Lower House Deputies have constituencies with whom they could work directly, thus giving real meaning to the concept of representative government.

We should encourage the Lower House deputies to establish grievance boards at the provincial level, consisting of well-known political and religious leaders from their constituencies, where complaints can be brought by the people and used by the deputies as a means for improving legislation and the government administrative apparatus. (This effort should be put in the context of developing a national conscience.) We should encourage President Thieu to ask the Lower House deputies to act as representatives of the people in provincial planning and development exercises. We should also encourage the Lower House deputies to establish provincial offices to inform their constituencies about what is happening nationally and to solicit the cooperation and support of local

political and religious leaders. And the U. S. should recruit highly skilled U. S. legislative assistance to work directly with the members of the National Assembly, giving them advice on how to organize committees, formulate and pass legislation, improve relationships between the Upper and Lower Houses and develop relationships with their constituencies.

**k. Minimize the Negative Political Impact of Military Operations.**

The Vietnamese Government has lost considerable popular support as a result of what the people consider to be the indiscriminate use of fire power and the deaths and destruction resulting from accidents. In contrast, the enemy is admired for their fire discipline. Improved guidelines have been issued by MACV and the Vietnamese JGS for use of fire power in populated areas. Perhaps one way we can minimize further the negative political impact of military operations is to better sensitize the American and Vietnamese soldiers to the Vietnamese people. (Reports say that Chinese soldiers receive four months of training, including an orientation to Vietnamese customs and language, before being assigned to North Vietnam for an eight month tour.) We should submit our own troops to more intensive indoctrination to orient and sensitize our soldiers to the Vietnamese, hopefully developing some identification with them as fellow human beings. We should also insist that the Vietnamese carry out a systematic indoctrination of their own troops in their

primary role as "protectors and defenders of the people".

**IV. Promote Political Organizational Efforts in Urban Areas.**

A nationalist political organizational vacuum currently existed in the urban as well as rural areas. Although urban dwellers are an easily-reached audience, the enemy, rather than the GVN has been making significant gains in these areas. We should encourage the use of the self-defense program as a basis for organizational efforts at the neighborhood (Lien Gia) level. (Popular associations with elected leaders could be established at this level for defense, intelligence collection, and social welfare activities.) We should also encourage the Lien Minh to initially focus their political organizational efforts in the urban areas, using the concepts and techniques developed by the leaders of the District Eight project. The Lien Minh should in turn establish close ties with youth groups and use their energy and enthusiasm .