

## Seizing the Initiative

It is unnecessary to dwell on the seriousness of the situation in South Viet Nam. The central government remains in a state of considerable disarray. Its rural political-administrative apparatus is becoming increasingly disorganized and is being driven back to areas along main communications routes or immediately around district or provincial capitals. The effectiveness of the armed forces is diminishing. This is the result of a decline in the discipline and esprit of the officer corps since the November coup and a decline in the force level due to combat attrition, desertions and the inability of the government to recruit as its rural control shrinks.

Within the limits of present U.S. policy there are two objectives to be accomplished as soon as possible.

One is to help the South Vietnamese stabilize an interim central government and help it draw up and proclaim political and economic-social policies which are genuinely revolutionary but which at the same time are to be implemented orderly and under law, and which are a consensus of the wishes of the major active political forces.

To do this, and then progressively to transform the interim government and its policies into a strong political system from Saigon to the hamlets capable of achieving broad popular support, and, therefore, of victory, will require time and a spirit of hope among the non-communist Vietnamese.

The latter two requirements can be accomplished only by seizing the initiative, putting the communists on the defensive and weakening their rural power as rapidly as possible. You cannot revitalize and rebuild a government in Saigon and in the countryside when a rival government dominates much of the country and is growing increasingly strong.

Communist rural power can be weakened only by the more effective, offensive use of the armed forces, particularly ARVN. This paper discusses how to achieve this objective.

ARVN at present is targeted offensively against communist main force and local (regional) units in the classic mission of the destruction of the enemy's army. A second mission is pacification support, to take part in clear and secure operations to expand government zones of authority by establishing strategic hamlets.

At this stage, Viet Cong main force and local units are elusive targets at best and are not the most profitable ones since they are not the main source of communist power. Pacification is not likely to succeed because of the lack of a strong central government and the ineffectiveness of the government's rural apparatus. Thus, even if ARVN effectively cleared a region it is unlikely the government apparatus would be strong enough to secure it. In addition, the Vietnamese, particularly military leaders, are fed up with pacification and will support such efforts only half-heartedly; and finally, pacification operations at this critical point tie down too many troops in too small a space for too long.

What is needed is a procedure which will enable ARVN and, to the extent possible, the Regional and Popular Forces, to fragment and weaken the heart of the communists' power, their rural local government, that is to say, their political-military organizations at the district and village echelons.

A central premise of this paper is that this rival rural government is thoroughly organized, is the main source of communist power and is a finite, tangible target if the proper procedure is used.

The idea is to begin to break down communist rural power thus providing time and motivation for reorganization of the central government and of its rural political ~~and military resources~~ <sup>apparatus</sup> before undertaking the long and difficult task of replacing the communist apparatus with a government one in contested and Viet Cong zones (*pacification*).

The procedure should be essentially simple, clear and precise in detail. If it is, it would appear that sufficient discipline and esprit remains in the armed forces to make implementation of the policy realistically possible.

This approach would be applicable in the critical provinces around Saigon and in most of the Mekong Delta, particularly during the dry season. It also would be applicable in the central coastal plains but not in parts of the High Plateau or any remote, sparsely populated regions where the communists conceal themselves in the terrain rather than among the people and where their strength is more military than political.

There would be two main efforts in the policy. One would be military and intelligence operations to put off balance and eliminate as much of the communists' rural governmental structure as possible. The other would be a political-psychological effort, with each soldier serving in effect as an ambassador of the government, to weaken the Viet Cong apparatus by separating it from the people and by dividing from the doctrinaire communists those members of the organization, particularly at the district and village levels, who are more nationalists than communists.

The latter effort would have two other vital purposes. It would be the first step in transforming ARVN and as much of the Regional and Popular Forces as possible, into a revolutionary army with a critical political as well as military mission in the countryside. It also would be the first step in laying the groundwork for eventual restoration of government authority throughout the countryside by indoctrinating the population against the Viet Cong as a foreign army duping and exploiting the people and hindering the government from helping them.

From a pessimistic point of view, the policy should be valuable as a prelude to negotiations, if any, since if the communist rural government was taking steady casualties, becoming tyranized in the eyes of the population and dissension and disaffection were spreading through its ranks, the communists' bargaining position obviously would be weaker.

A relatively detailed procedure to carry out this policy is outlined below:

1. After a brief initial period of intense indoctrination and training, perhaps one week, a regimental size unit would be assigned to a district for ten days to two weeks.

Use of a unit of this size in this space for this time is recommended for these reasons:

—Since under the procedure ARVN is employed in a totally different way,

the span of control should be tight. Under this method a handful of competent regimental commanders should be able to put across the new concept successfully.

—It would appear wise to concentrate a large force in a given space for a short time rather than a small force in the same space for a long time. A large force would increase confidence and therefore encourage small unit operations in the operational area. It also would provide enough troops to spread over a wide space simultaneously which is a requirement for success. The relatively brief operational period would permit the troops to operate at maximum efficiency with a definite end and period of rest in sight. Finally, this approach would permit ARVN to make full use of <sup>its</sup> advantage of being able to move and concentrate forces far more rapidly than the communists.

2. The unit would simultaneously occupy and then operate in several adjoining villages in the CONTESTED ZONE of the district: from one company to one battalion would be assigned to each village in the operational area, depending on the size of the village.

During the time the operational area was being occupied, eagle flights should be available to engage any communists who might be flushed out.

While communist provincial and district boundaries frequently differ from those of the government, their village boundaries apparently are the same as those of the RVN. In populated regions Viet Cong district committees and military units usually remain in one or more hamlets in a village although often they also have bases hidden in remote places.

Assignment of units by village combined with available intelligence thus should target ARVN against the enemy's district and village political-military organizations.

Each unit assigned to a village should be large enough to occupy, or dominate through patrols and ambushes, most of the hamlets in the village at the same time, concentrating against known or suspected communist hamlets.

The idea is to force most of the communists' village organization (and district apparatus if present) either to leave or to become victims of subsequent patrols, ambushes and intelligence efforts.

Since the operation would be taking place in several neighboring villages at the same time, at minimum, the harassment and loss of face and esprit to the communists should be considerable. If they left they would have to move a good distance and remain away for the duration of the operation. They would be forced to stay in areas with which they were not familiar which would cause supply and possibly security problems and would result in a drop in esprit. The departure of their organization also would result in a decline in their prestige in their own village.

3. Once a unit had occupied a village it would follow a simple standard operating procedure.



A patrol and ambush pattern would be established. Each patrol would have three general missions: military action if possible, intelligence collection and information-propaganda efforts. Specific tasks for each mission would be assigned to each patrol. Virtually all patrolling would be done during the day to reduce the command and control problem in an area saturated with friendly troops. This problem also should be eased by the fact that village boundaries usually are clearly defined by rivers, canals, roads and so on. Patrols would visit all the inhabitants in the village and would comb the village area, the lightly settled or uninhabited parts (within reason) as well as the hamlets.

During the day ambush positions would be chosen and there would be a number of ambushes each night.

Dispersion of friendly forces over a relatively large area should not pose a serious security problem. Since their local governmental apparatus would be disrupted, dispersed and disorganized and therefore unable to provide adequate intelligence and security for large communist units, it is unlikely the Viet Cong would send such units into the operational area. If they did, government patrols could rely on air, artillery and helicopter support should they encounter a superior enemy force, during the day.

Day ambushes and night harassment or raids by district and village units might present some difficulty. During the day, however, ARVN would have superior communications and firepower, and air observation; and since the operational area would be saturated with troops and patrols the odds should be as good to ambush as to be ambushed since the communists never could be certain from which direction or when to expect a patrol.

At night, the unit in the village would concentrate in company perimeters (or a company perimeter), or mutually supporting platoon positions, with ambushes out. The troops should be positioned in all or part of a hamlet in a relatively tight perimeter with good fields of fire. A strict curfew should forbid movement at night except with a light. Anyone moving without a light would be shot on sight.

3-A. In addition to the military operations, the intelligence effort would make up another part of the standard operating procedure.

During the operation every possible villager would be questioned in a friendly but firm manner by pre-designated NCOs and soldiers. This procedure should be announced throughout the operational area so that everyone will know that everyone else is being questioned. As a result, the villagers should be more willing to provide information since they will know it will be difficult for the communists to discover who talked. Each person would be asked a series of standard questions: What do you know about the Viet Cong? Who collects communist taxes? Who are the young men who have been tricked into joining the Viet Cong or forced to do so? and so on.

Experience has shown that through mass questioning a number of suspects will be identified. Few if any of these will be the hard-core of the local communist government. Most will be rank and file communists or non-communist members of the National Liberation Front. Some, perhaps many, of the latter may be respected local citizens who have sided with the communists not because they believe in communism or even understand it but because the Viet Cong are powerful and because these non-communists feel the communists, or "National Liberators", are pursuing

a more worthy cause than is the government. Frequently, these citizens believe they are supporting a movement of "National Liberation", not the Vietnamese Communist Party. To them the words "national liberation" signify national independence from the Americans and their Vietnamese "puppet" government and liberation from traditionally unsatisfactory local political, economic and social conditions. These people must be handled carefully.

Once a list of suspects has been drawn up, as many as possible should be taken into custody simultaneously and questioned by intelligence personnel. Experience has demonstrated that questioning of a number of suspects separately but at the same time (using again the principle that since many have been questioned no one will know who talked) will lead to detection of part of the local hard-core apparatus. Most of these cadre will have vanished but a few usually remain behind and there is a chance of eliminating them. In addition, this intelligence will be valuable in subsequent operations.

The entire intelligence operation also will cause considerable consternation in the communists ranks since they will not know who has talked or how much the government knows and thus will be uneasy and suspicious of each other.

The non-communist suspects should be returned to district headquarters temporarily, treated with particular fairness and decency, re-indoctrinated and sent home, some to serve as government intelligence agents if they are willing.

4. Concurrent with the military and intelligence operations, political-psychological efforts will be carried out as part of the standard operating procedure.

The importance of this cannot be over-emphasized. If some, even many, communists are killed or captured but at the same time an angry, alienated village is left behind as a result of government injustice and brutality, the operation will have failed.

It should be pointed out again that the operation has two objectives: to destroy or weaken the enemy's local governmental apparatus; and to begin to develop passive popular support, that is to say, to turn the people against the communists as the bearers of war and misery to the community.

The government cannot expect active support until it can help the people defend themselves and purge the communists from the village. But it is easier to tear down than to build, and discrediting the communists in the eyes of the people should be the first step in persuading the population to back the government actively.

During the initial indoctrination and training period the information-propaganda mission should be emphasized more than the military-intelligence mission.

The troops should be told that the new Vietnamese government, fully independent of any foreign control, seeks peace, freedom and a better life for its people. But the communists stand in the way.

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The troops should be told that it is the duty of each soldier to explain this to the people and to tell the latter the truth about the communists who are duping and exploiting the population. The soldiers should be told to inform the people that the communists wish to establish an absolute dictatorship, take away everyone's land and destroy the family system, and that they don't let the population know this now because they need the people's help. But if the communists ever seize power they will betray the people and these things will happen as they already have happened in countries the communists have conquered. The soldiers also should be told to criticize the communists for high taxes, forced recruitment and unfulfilled promises of a better life.

The troops also should emphasize the Chieu Hoi Program. They should tell the people that because the government is just and decent it welcomes back those citizens who have been tricked or forced into supporting the communists, that the government will treat citizens who genuinely wish to return to the right cause fairly and help them begin a new life.

The troops also must be told that their words must be backed by deeds, that is, through proper attitude toward and conduct among the people. A simple code of conduct should be drawn up and the soldiers told ~~that~~ <sup>that</sup> violators will be punished severely.

The information-propaganda program should be essentially a soldier-to-citizen effort. There should be no use of unskilled unmotivated propaganda cadre and no mass meetings. Only skillfully written appropriate literature should be disseminated.

Upon occupying the operational area, one of the first things to be done is for the soldiers to tell the population why government forces are there. The troops should say that the government wishes peace and a better life for its people but that the communists are trying to stop the government from helping the population and restoring peace; that the government forces have arrived to ~~drive out~~ <sup>stop</sup> the communists; that innocent citizens will not be hurt, indeed, those in need of medical attention will receive it; that even Viet Cong who genuinely wish to return to the right cause will be helped not hurt; and that the government expects at the time nothing from the people except that they ~~do not~~ <sup>do not</sup> help the communists.

One possibility worth serious consideration is to urge the Army and the Buddhists to work out an agreement under which Buddhist monks would accompany ARVN units on such operations to help the troops urge the population not to help the communists. Such an arrangement might provide the spark which would make the political-psychological effort catch fire. It might also channel the energies of the Buddhists into a valuable purpose, bind the Buddhists and the Army more closely and commit the Buddhists more firmly against the communists and any neutralist solution.

The district in which the operation is taking place should assign a liaison official to the regimental staff and one official with each ARVN unit operating in a village. The latter should record all intelligence collected and select and contact villagers who appear to be potential pro-government leaders and who might be willing to act as intelligence and agitpropaganda cadre until the government can establish permanent presence.



If there are village officials either living in exile or in a safe part of the village who are not discredited in the eyes of the people because of past dishonesty and/or injustice, they of course should work with the ARVN forces assigned to the village.

When the operation ends the communist governmental apparatus in the operational area (part or all of the district's contested zone) should have been disorganized, disrupted and discouraged. This should result in a substantial easing of communist pressure on the government zone in the district for some time, perhaps months. Government esprit in the district also should have been increased as a result of the success of the operation, and a psychological wedge should have been driven between the communists and the people which will make the latter more willing to help the government as long as it can be done without much risk.

When the government's district political and military resources have been reorganized and revitalized sufficiently (this subject is not discussed in detail in this paper) those resources which can be spared from securing the RVN zone should be used to repeat the same type of operation in the contested zone in company size units.

To enable the government's Regional and Popular Forces to carry out such operations effectively and to indoctrinate and breathe new life into these forces which make up about half ~~the~~ the RVN's armed power, small ARVN cadre teams from units which have participated in such operations should serve as mobile district training teams.

Eventually it should be possible to expand the government zone in the district (to implement pacification) relatively rapidly. This should be possible because the communist apparatus will have been weakened, the government organization strengthened and the contested zone prepared for expansion of RVN authority.

The latter means that preparatory intelligence and psychological efforts should have resulted in identification and political softening up of hamlets, if possible groups of mutually supporting ones, in which the people and particularly accepted local leaders progressively have been persuaded to support the government actively. When this point has been reached, the transformation of these hamlets into genuine strategic hamlets is relatively easy. Troops are sent to defend the hamlets while district officials help the local leaders set up an adequate internal and external defense system and establish formal local self-rule.

In addition to the ARVN effort in CONTESTED ZONES there should be a continual campaign of psychological and military harassment by air against communist BASE AREAS, as well as an intense effort to improve intelligence concerning these bases. From time to time this campaign should be reinforced by ARVN operations against vital bases. These operations must be carefully planned and executed in a manner similar to the procedure used in the contested zones. This subject is not discussed in detail in this paper.