

Take to Work
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DRAFT

USOM/Rural Affairs

THE SITUATION IN THE DELTA

Some say that the situation in the Delta is deteriorating, while others say it is improving. Contradictory as these statements appear, both are probably true if their bases are accepted.

The regular and irregular military forces of the GVN are unquestionably increasing in numbers and in capabilities. They are killing or capturing more VC than before.

The regular and irregular forces of the VC are also increasing in their strength and capabilities according to many in the field, although this is not reflected in the MAC/V OB. They may not be killing, capturing or securing the defection of as many members of the GVN forces proportionately as they were 6 months or a year ago. On the other hand, they are mounting attacks by larger, better armed and equipped units against "harder" targets more often than they were 6 months or a year ago.

Substantially, the same situation appears to exist with regard to the civilian population. Both the GVN and the VC appear to have better control of larger numbers of civilians than was true six months or a year ago. More roads are safer to travel than they were a year ago. But, at the same time, the VC have stepped up their mining activities, have demonstrated a capability to stage ambushes, or dig up roads, mine and blow up bridges within the perimeter of strategic hamlets whose location was dictated by a desire to "secure the communications axes".

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It is thus apparent that whether one says that the situation is deteriorating or is improving depends upon one's point of view -- and is relatively immaterial. The fact is that both sides are increasing their capabilities. The conclusion is that neither the GVN nor the VC can be said to be winning or losing the war in the Delta.

Understandably in light of our culture and social organization, we want palpable, countable, measurable indices of progress or retrogression. In our desire to construct such indices we necessarily hypothesize -- and too often factor our hypotheses by unverified figures to reach a conclusion -- then too often accepted as a working assumption (or even as fact) on which we base conclusions.

This is what has happened with the Strategic Hamlet program. We have hypothesized that the position of the VC could be made untenable by placing the vast majority of the rural population in Strategic Hamlets having certain characteristics. This hypothesis appears generally sound, and generally in line with the best available knowledge of counter-insurgency. Having accepted this hypothesis, we have proceeded to support Strategic Hamlets, but we (Americans) have been too largely forced to rely on the statements of GVN officials concerning the number and characteristics of the hamlets "completed". (See Inclosure A for criteria of hamlet "completion".) These statements come from officials who often believe that their heads almost literally depend upon their achieving, at least in reports, the goals set for them. Worse, we tend to accept technical completion as meaningful, forgetting that the whole hypothesis depends on the extent to which the desired characteristics are met.

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The great temptation, then, is to factor the hypothesis against the reported figures, parlay these against population and area estimates, and conclude that we have achieved a comparable degree of success in winning the war.

We are now forced to recognize that the reports have not always been accurate: -- that, in fact, hamlets have been reported a "complete" which do not even exist on the ground, much less meet the criteria of organization and development which would justify reporting them as complete. That this is true should surprise no one. It should be even less surprising that "completion" of hamlets does not mean that their residents are, or have yet been given reason to be, committed to the side of government or against the VC. The inescapable deduction which must be drawn -- that we have not demonstrably reached a measure of success proportionate to the number of hamlets reported as complete, -- does seem to occasion some surprise.

We are also being forced to take into consideration factors which seem to have been overlooked. We are being forced to realize that hamlets built in areas dominated by the VC will probably require substantial forces for their protection for an extended period of time. We are being forced to realize that most of the manpower required for developing viable hamlets must be drawn from the people now committed to the creation of new ones. We are, in short, being forced to realize that our resources in-country are finite, and that we cannot simultaneously carry the war aggressively

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to the VC, build and protect large numbers of new hamlets, and make of those already built viable hamlets which will accomplish their purposes. Our failure to realize this earlier has lead us to believe we were making more progress than was actually true, while our inability to act aggressively enough against the VC has enabled them to increase their strength.

The most serious failure has been a failure fully to see and to appreciate the reverse of the strategic hamlet coin. We have failed fully to realize and to understand that if the Strategic Hamlets which are built do not serve to commit the people to the side of government -- if the many hardships inevitably suffered by those placed in, or forced to construct, these hamlets lead the hamlet inmates to commit themselves against the government -- the war is irrevocably lost.

President Diem most aptly stated that the Strategic Hamlet is a state of mind. This it most certainly is, for it is usually neither a defensible position nor a good control mechanism; it neither effectively separates the people physically from the VC nor, even when "completed," necessarily offers them a truly better way of life, a real reason for committing themselves to the side of their government and against the VC. Strategic Hamlets are successful counter-insurgency implements to the degree that they create the "Strategic Hamlet state of mind," and they have indeed been surprisingly successful.

Limited observation suggests that too many hamlets, in their present state of development, offer to their residents good reason for commitment to the Viet Cong and against the government. They might now be so committed

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were the Vietnamese a less docile people, or less tired of the constant harassment by both sides in this war. This commitment to the VC can happen, and indeed certainly has happened in many hamlets, although in far fewer than some observers predicted.

We must not let this happen in very many hamlets. We must make sure that the hamlet dwellers are committed to our side in this fight. Even if this meant, and it does not, that we could take no offensive action against the VC for a year or two years, it would be better to assure the commitment of the people already in hamlets than to build even one more.

We, therefore, recommend that the priority of civilian effort be given to ensuring that the people in hamlets already created, are indeed given reason and adequate encouragement to commit themselves to the side of the government. We further recommend that adequate military forces continue to be made available and be better employed to assure reasonable security to these hamlets. (This does not imply unreserved endorsement of the "clear-and-hold" concept.)

Finally, we recommend that existing military and para-military forces employ to the maximum those proven tactics of aggressive small unit action, attraction of civilian support, and intensive intelligence collection effort which have proven successful in other counter-insurgencies.

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