

- 7/9/64

TO : Mr. James S. Killen
Director, USOM/Vietnam

FROM : Rufus Phillips

SUBJECT: Vietnam

I. INTRODUCTION:

This paper is in response to your request for a written statement of my views. The situation and the needs of Vietnam deserve treatment in a depth which the pressure of time will not permit to be given to this paper. Accordingly, I have attached four additional papers, with which I entirely concur, which amplify or illustrate various points which I shall seek to make here. The first of these papers, "Concept for Victory in Vietnam", was recently prepared by a small informal group of individuals with extensive successful experience in counter-insurgency, and in Vietnam. The senior member of that group is Major General Edward G. Lansdale, (Ret). The second paper, "Building a Political Base for Government in Vietnam", is a draft prepared by a member of that same group, with the collaboration of myself and others. The others are the last two reports by Earl Young, your provincial representative in Long An province, on the progress of pacification there since January of this year when the then U.S. Ambassador declared Long An top priority, and promised it his fullest support. This paper should give you an idea of the problems which Americans and Vietnamese share in seeking to get things done, and, hopefully, encourage you to shatter precedent and go out to see for yourself.

II. NATURE OF THE WAR:

It is not enough to say that the war is primarily political, that is a war for the hearts and minds of the population, that great emphasis must be given to psychological warfare and civic action, etc. These are all truths which have been repeated many times, but too few evidence understanding of what they really mean and how they must be applied. Too much lip service to these concepts has already been paid by Vietnamese and Americans while their actions have undermined the very principles of counter-insurgency they profess to support. In the first place, it is a war for the population, not against a well-defined, visible enemy. Therefore, unless the population can be won over, the enemy cannot be separated from the population and eliminated or induced to surrender. Drastic measures of rigid population control are not the answer if we are to offer that same population a desirable alternative to the Viet Cong.

Vietnam is not Malaya and police-state methods cannot be applied in Vietnam with the British sense of fair play, equal justice and efficiency, which alone can make them either tolerable or effective. Hence, the only workable alternative is an all-out effort to win the loyalty and support of enough, a majority, of the population. This can only be won by demonstrating by actions that the Government is truly concerned for the population's welfare, effectively seeks to protect them (night and day), and actively helps them to help themselves. Economic and social programs are extremely helpful if, and only if, they are closely tied in with effective security and local self-government. Then, and only then will the people themselves join in the fight, and by cooperating make control measures effective against the minority.

To make possible proper attitudes and proper actions which will win support for the Government, there must be for that Government's actions a political base in which all are afforded opportunity to participate, and which most understand and support. The need for a political base and how it can be achieved receive a much fuller treatment in two of the attached papers. One panacea currently being offered for winning the war is believed worthy of special mention. That is total mobilization. We have apparently been urging this as the answer to having everyone join in the war effort. Until there is a political base, until a substantial majority are willingly committed to the fight, total mobilization can only be forced and is therefore meaningless and will certainly be harmful if applied.

III. URGENCY OF THE SITUATION:

The situation in Vietnam is urgent and critical. The superficial signs of some progress in pacification which are now showing should not be interpreted to mean that the trend has certainly been reversed. Far more fundamental changes are required, some of which are not likely to be adequately represented among the changes currently advocated by much of the new, very high-level U.S. team now operating in Vietnam. These changes are selective, psychological, and political in character, not massive and military. Vietnam remains highly vulnerable to a Viet Cong take-over through internal collapse because the Vietnamese Government does not have a firm political base, either among its own officers and civil servants or in the countryside. A series of successful Viet Cong military operations designed for maximum psychological impact could, in the opinion of many, precipitate such a collapse. The

The Viet Cong are, in my opinion, capable of mounting these operations. The most immediate need is for political unity at the top among Vietnamese leaders concurrent with beginning the construction of a firm political base, while avoiding alienation of significant numbers of the petty elite. It cannot be forced by simply indicating all-out backing for Khanh as we have tended to do. Much of what is needed, and of how the Americans can and must help, is outlined in considerable detail in the attached papers. Even though the dispatch of a small team such as the one set forth in "Concept for Victory in Vietnam", seems neither likely nor feasible at present, some individual Americans currently in Vietnam can still assist heavily in this vital effort to develop unity and a sound political base if properly back-stopped. It cannot be done by "official" contacts between high ranking Vietnamese and American personalities. The Vietnamese will simply not let down their hair and tell their problems to four-star generals or Under-Secretaries of State.

IV. PROGRESS IN PACIFICATION:

Progress in pacification in Vietnam is, almost by definition, going to be slow if it is to be sound. The average Vietnamese villager has been "secured" so many times that he is almost totally disenchanted with the Vietnamese Government. It seems clear that few willingly support the Viet Cong, but even fewer have any faith in the Government's ability to protect them. This state of mind must be kept in constant view and understood if pacification and the New Rural Life Hamlet program are to succeed.

We made the mistake in 1962 and 1963 of going along with the Vietnamese Government's impulse to try to do too much too fast. Hamlets, long under Viet Cong control, were declared completed and secure for

the Government in a matter of a few weeks after Government teams and security forces had moved in. Thousands of civil servants and young men recruited off the streets were hastily trained and organized into Mobile Cadre teams. Government security forces continued to operate in their traditional manner in fixed posts while the area they were supposed to secure was constantly being extended.

Concurrently, the Vietnamese peasant was promised security and support from the Government in return for his work in building the hamlet. Many participated willingly in anticipation of the benefits (too many were also dragooned into it), but enough believed in the program so that had it provided real security, a true political base in the countryside would have been formed. Unfortunately, because of its over-extension and superficiality, the Viet Cong were able to assault the system, mainly through terrorism, and bring about the collapse of large portions of it. Security, night and day, became for most of the countryside a myth. It is still a myth.

Now we have erected new targets for progress - 7,000 well-trained and effective Mobile Cadre to be operating by the end of 1964, etc. These are not realistic goals and we seem to be repeating past mistakes. The mind of the Vietnamese peasant, and that of the civil servant and military officer, is not going to be changed overnight, yet it is minds and attitudes that we must change if there is to be any real progress. The late President Diem once said that "the strategic hamlet is a state of mind." Unfortunately, his Government did not follow this rule, and if we and the new Government ignore it, the results are certain to be even more negative. Perhaps they may be spectacular on paper

in the very short run but they are certain to be counter-productive not long thereafter. Moreover, it is not only the ideas of the peasants which must be changed but also those of the Government's administrators and soldiers, who are too detached, indifferent, arrogant, unmotivated, and often afraid to provide the needed leadership and inspiration. One new mistake in the attempt to speed up pacification, which is worthy of mention, is the decentralization of civil government functions to The Military Corps Commanders. Reports from Rural Affairs personnel returning on home leave indicate that the Corps have become major bottlenecks between Saigon and the Provinces. It is suggested that this is one of the things you might look out for during trips out of Saigon.

V. USOM RURAL AFFAIRS:

USOM Rural Affairs is a special organization. All of its members volunteered for their assignments. Most of them are either ex-IVS or retired military or other personnel with previous government or non-government experience in Southeast Asia. Few are career AID technicians or administrators. They are, by and large, a group of committed people. Their Vietnamese counterparts recognize this commitment and respond to it by working in closer harmony and understanding with them than with any other group of Americans in Vietnam. What this group needs and expects is support and backing, right on up through the Country Team, by ~~from~~ top-level USOM leadership for constructive U.S. advice to the Vietnamese -- advice which is not only technically and tactically sound, but which also reflects understanding of the true nature of the war as one for the population, not against it. As seen by USOM Rural Affairs

its major mission has always been to help the Vietnamese Government win the support of its people. So long as U. S. advice and support contribute to achieving that mission, it is right; when it negates that mission (the bombing and shelling of "enemy" villages with the concurrence of American advisors, to cite an example), it is wrong and a better way must be found to get at the enemy and destroy him. The attitude of Rural Affairs (as it is of not a few Vietnamese) is that it is an American duty to insist that the Vietnamese Government conduct itself in such a manner as to defend and promote, not destroy, the general welfare. If the USOM provincial representatives, who are the guts of the operation, are not allowed to retain the operational flexibility which comes from their independent and co-equal status with that of the U.S. Military and which has made them effective and responsive, those continuing actions needed to win the population will not take place.

VI. THE USOM FUNCTION:

The most useful function performed by USOM in the counter-insurgency effort to date, and this has mainly been performed by Rural Affairs, has been as a catalyst and guide to the Vietnamese Government at all echelons and as a secondary channel of communication from the field to Saigon to clear away roadblocks of misunderstanding, ignorance, and mistrust (between Vietnamese) within the Vietnamese Government involving USOM's major counter-insurgency responsibility (winning the civilian population). As in most Asian Governments, confusion and the lack of coordination and communication abound. Important decisions at the lowest level too often await consideration of the smallest details at the highest level. By relaying the true situation in the countryside to

Saigon through an alternate American channel, decisions can be obtained in hours which otherwise would take days or even months. The Vietnamese do not resent this so long as our channels do not supplant theirs; on the contrary, most appreciate and understand it when carried out in the proper constructive spirit. This vital function is best performed by the Associate Director for Counter-Insurgency (Rural Affairs) and those of his staff who have intimate contact with Vietnamese officials. To perform it, his office must have free access to all levels of the Vietnamese Government, including General Khanh as necessary. The formation of a high level U.S. coordinating group to direct the overall war effort in Vietnam, a long overdue innovation, does not relieve the Associate Director and his staff from this operational responsibility. If the counter-insurgency effort is to succeed, the Associate Director must not devote himself primarily to managing and administering his own operation but rather to the business of helping the Vietnamese Government to function effectively and to make proper use of the aid and advice being given. To perform this mission successfully, his office needs the fullest understanding, trust, and backing from the USOM Mission Director, and ultimately the Country Team. The effectiveness of USOM Rural Affairs (counter-insurgency) also depends, in my opinion, upon having it remain a relatively small, non-bureaucratic organization rather than converting it into a vast, advisory force comparable in size to the U.S. Military. Should this happen, its degeneration into an organization of time-servers and paper-pushers is clearly predictable.

VII. THE U.S. MILITARY MISSION:

Cooperation with U.S. military advisors in the provinces has been generally good. This is mainly because the military advisors at that level come in daily contact with the civilian side of the war and with the evident need to win the support of the population. At higher levels, particular at Corps and in Saigon, conventional military thinking prevails. Everybody talks about civic action and psychological warfare, but little command emphasis is placed on it and it is not understood. The major emphasis remains on "killing Viet Cong" and anything that gets in the way of killing Viet Cong. Unfortunately, the regular Vietnamese Army reflects the same tendencies.

Lately it has been decided that in certain critical provinces where security is a major problem the military advisor shall command all American advisors in the province including the USOM provincial representative. If MACV had demonstrated a true understanding of the nature of the war or were these particular advisors to be removed from the existing cumbersome MACV chain of command (Saigon, Corps, and Division to Province) and made directly responsible to the U.S. Coordinating Committee, this arrangement might be acceptable. As it stands, the decision to place USOM provincial representatives under the U.S. Military must be reversed because it subjects USOM operations to all of the bureaucratic ineffectiveness and unresponsiveness which continues to characterize the 17,000 man "little Pentagon" we have created in Vietnam. On the human side, it has already created morale problems among the provincial representatives because they know

intimately how impossible it is to get anything effective done through the U.S. Military chain of command and because the success of their efforts in the past has so often depended on their ability to go to Saigon directly to get immediate support. Despite well-meaning efforts now being made to make this vast machine more responsive to the Vietnamese situation, I cannot but be pessimistic about the results.

VIII. THE NATURE OF THE VIETNAMESE

The Vietnamese accept advice readily if they like and trust the advisor and come to believe that he is deeply committed to the fight. The time which establishment of such a relationship takes is one of the factors that has seriously hampered our military advisory effort in the field. The Vietnamese complain to our people that once they have gotten to know and like their U.S. military counterpart, he leaves after his one-year tour.

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The Vietnamese/highly nationalistic; their fight for independence, even though subverted by the Communists, has been a heartfelt struggle with almost universal support. The main political theme of the Communists is liberation of the south from the Americans, while the Vietnamese on our side are motivated by the desire to maintain their independence from China and China's satellite, North Vietnam. In this climate of deeply held convictions, it would be a fatal error for the Americans to assume direct command. This would cut the heart/^{out} of the Vietnamese effort. In a war where motivation is more important than efficiency, this would also remove the main cause, beyond self-preservation, for which the Vietnamese have fought and are still willing to fight. The

nationalistic

Vietnamese are often reluctant to express their feelings on this and other subjects on which they have opinions contrary to those of an American, but this silence should not be interpreted as consent.

IX. CONCLUSION

The American tendency has always been to push for quick, dramatic results. This is likely to continue unless we achieve a better understanding of the Vietnamese, of the nature of their situation and of the war we are trying to fight. Dramatic results are not possible without the political base to support them or without a political cause in which the Vietnamese deeply believe. Such a cause or base does not now exist and until it does, it is hard to see how the struggle can become very much more than a continuation of the present war of attrition. However, even if this base and cause are slow in emerging, the Americans and particularly USOM, because its Rural Affairs personnel are closest to the Vietnamese, can do much to avoid the mistakes of the past and initiate the changes required for a win in the future. Finally, there is no substitute in this kind of struggle, in which so many intangibles are involved, for firsthand experience. This cannot be had by whirlwind inspection trips to the countryside. If one is unable to spend the night and have a chance to chat informally with the Vietnamese and Americans in the provinces, provincial visits are not worth the bother. Exceedingly few, if any, high level American officials have ever had the time, and in some cases the inclination, to stay longer and probe deeper. This is probably why the general thrust of our advisory effort has all too often reflected an inadequate appreciation of the situation and the problem.

The Vietnamese desperately need our understanding help to succeed. The answers are not easy to come by but must be obtained and correctly applied if we are to succeed.

Enclosures:

1. Concept for victory in Vietnam
2. Building a Political Base for Government in Vietnam
3. Long An Provincial Report - June 15, 1964
4. " " " " - May 7, 1964