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OBSERVATIONS ON THE WAR IN VIETNAM

(By: Ogden Williams, F/VN)

1. The Nature of the War:

The war in Vietnam is predominantly political and psychological in nature. At a given time and place the situation may be primarily military, when either the GVN or the Viet Cong make it so, and of course the authorities in North Vietnam could at any time introduce additional military forces which would again make the war predominantly military in a given situation. Nevertheless, as of June 26, 1964, when I left Vietnam, the situation was recognized by all experienced U.S. and Vietnamese authorities as being predominantly a political-psychological challenge. To win a political-psychological war, one must use political-psychological tactics above all else. This will be discussed below.

2. The Security Situation:

As of June 26, 1964, the security situation in the country was clearly better than it had been three or four months earlier. After the November 1963 coup and the January 1964 coup, there had been a vacuum in the provinces of an administrative nature. Necessarily the chain of command was disrupted by constant changes of personnel, funds were not flowing down to the provinces and, most important, the direction of the new regime and implementing instructions were not yet clear. In this vacuum, the Viet Cong was in many areas the only organized political force. Necessarily, the Viet Cong tended to fill the vacuum. In areas where other political forces continued to exist, as with the Hoa Hao in An Giang province, no vacuum existed and the Viet Cong did not significantly extend its area of control. During the period February to June, the Khanh Government slowly organized itself and with constant American assistance managed to get money and directives flowing again to the provinces. The results of this forward movement were already apparent by end of June. I Corps had gone ahead the fastest under the energetic and imaginative leadership of the Corps commander. More of Quang Tin province, for example, was in GVN hands by the end of June than had ever been under Government control since the beginning of the insurgency. The Vietnamese Army was showing greater comprehension of military civic action as a political tool than had ever before been witnessed. Even more important, there was a spirit readily apparent in the province headquarters of the four provinces of I Corps that things were now moving again and that the enemy was on the defensive.

In II Corps, one might cite the Do Xa operation in Quang Ngai province as an example of government initiative, where GVN forces raided in strength a traditional Viet Cong main force headquarters, capturing

a number of weapons and destroying fixed installations and food supplies. This operation disrupted the Viet Cong command structure, and again, demonstrated an aggressive spirit on the part of the Government that symbolized the forward movement that has succeeded the period of paralysis.

On June 21, I accompanied the Province Chief of Tay Ninh province in III Corps for a picnic on Ba Den Mountain. This was to me symbolic of the favorable turn of events in that critical III Corps province. The mountain where we held our picnic had been under constant Viet Cong control since the beginning of the insurgency. During the day, we made arrangements to install a small generator on the mountain to light up the famous temple and demonstrate to the people all around that the forces of law and order had returned to this historic place.

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~~III~~ Corps, which includes the Trans-Bassac provinces, which have always been a center for Viet Cong strength, is now the theater for active and aggressive "oil-spot" operations. Aggressive province chiefs are in place in such critical provinces such as Dinh Tuong and Long An. ~~In~~ definite forward movement is evident.

Regarding Saigon itself, the Viet Cong undoubtedly have the capability of mounting incidents, but the general atmosphere of the city is more secure, in my opinion, than that of Washington, D. C. U.S. personnel of either sex can visit any part of the city by day or night with less chance of being molested than would be the case in most major American cities. There is absolutely no atmosphere of panic, and people are more concerned with making a living than with any insecurity problem. Very few incidents, in fact, take place. Saigon is no longer a miniature police state as it was in the last months of the Diem regime, and people go about their business as usual.

In conclusion, the Viet Cong are certainly capable of mounting battalion-size operations. Choosing the time and place of their attack, they can achieve a temporary tactical advantage, but the GVN forces are resisting remarkably well and have recently been more aggressive in carrying the battle to the enemy. The GVN controls all the national population centers, circulates freely on all national communication routes, enjoys the anti-Communist support of a powerful army, the middle class, the Catholics, the bureaucracy and most of the urban student population. It is significant that Vietnamese students, unsupported by the United States, have organized themselves for voluntary work in the hamlets and are now so engaged. The desire to do something is there. It must be mobilized and encouraged.

3. Analysis of National Problems:

The principal areas of danger in Vietnam, in order of priority, were as of June 26, 1964 the following:

- (a) The danger of American mismanagement and confusion.
- (b) The continuing inability of the Vietnamese Government to organize itself politically and administratively.
- (c) The Viet Cong.

With respect to the American role, there have long been in Vietnam an economic aid mission and a military aid mission. What has been lacking in recent years has been a comparable "political aid mission". Whereas the Embassy is organized to do political reporting and to convey U.S. policies to the Government of Vietnam, it is neither organized nor staffed to provide constant, intimate and imaginative guidance to the Government of Vietnam on how to solve its political and organizational problems. As a result, United States assistance has lacked the kind of orchestration which the Communists provide through the Central Committee. In most countries, an Embassy which attempted to give political guidance to a host country would find itself highly resented. This is not the case in Vietnam, nor doubtless in other developing countries which have emerged into a cold war situation. Just as Vietnamese political-psychological leadership is the key to the winning of the war, so United States leadership could be the key to better Vietnamese leadership. Before June 26, 1964, the USOM, MAC/V, USIS and CAS were like arms and legs of a body which had no adequate directing brain. Frustrated by this situation, MAC/V on several occasions made efforts to step into this role and on about June 20 finally succeeded in persuading Ambassador Lodge to name General Westmoreland as the United States "Executive Agent" for operations in certain critical provinces and for liaison with the GVN Central Pacification Committee. This was an attempt to solve the problem of inadequate political-psychological direction, but it was a mistaken attempt, since the United States military in Vietnam is not organized or staffed to direct a political-psychological effort which is only partially military in nature. Indeed, it must be noted that the United States military, possibly as a result of its one-year tour policy, has proved itself over the years to be less responsive to vital political and psychological considerations than other members of the country team. For example, in June of 1964, the ARVN forces advised by MAC/V in An Xuyen province were still going out on battalion-size operations in which the troops carried very little money, food or water because they clearly intended to live off the population. Again, ARVN's highway conduct on the roads between Saigon and Camau is so arrogant and seemingly contemptuous of the lives and property of civilians that it alienates the

population every day of the week. More important, MAC/V was the last member of the country team to realize how serious was the interference of Division in pacification operations of the Sector. In June, MAC/V presented a paper to the Vietnamese General Staff proposing that Division take charge of "all resources, political, economic and social". This, despite the fact that Division has no assets, experience or motivation in the political, economic or social areas, whereas provinces and districts have for years been attempting to cope with these aspects. With the addition of General Taylor, Mr. Johnson and Mr. Sullivan, it is possible that a better balance will be achieved by restoring to the Embassy its key role as the Director of United States assistance in Vietnam. Unfortunately, it is not yet apparent that these gentlemen are organized or staffed to provide detailed, intimate guidance and support to the Vietnamese leaders, nor that they will be able in any case to spend the necessary time with the Vietnamese. They may be so occupied with running the coordinated country team that their relationships with the Vietnamese will necessarily more resemble those of a traditional Embassy. Ideally, Johnson and Sullivan should establish a "cold war staff" consisting of four or five people who have demonstrated their grasp of the real problems in Vietnam and their ability to lead the Vietnamese.

4. U. S. Aid to Vietnam:

There seems to be an unfortunate conviction in Washington, particularly in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, that the infusion of more men, money and material will necessarily produce victory in Vietnam. This is a dangerous over-simplification, and is mischievous to the extent that it tends to ignore the real problems - the political-psychological problems - and the necessity of quality rather than quantity in the American effort. Virtually all experienced American observers in Vietnam would assert that the present levels of U.S. aid could win the war four or five times over if such aid were utilized in support of skillful political and psychological operations. It is noted that the Viet Cong have done quite well without a MAP support program, without extensive foreign military advisors, without cement or bulgar wheat. It is noted also that the Viet Minh threw out the French who had a modern army massively supported by the United States, the Viet Minh having only bare hands in the beginning and a fierce nationalistic motivation. More recently, the Buddhists of Vietnam caused the over throw of the Diem regime with a spirit of sacrifice and 25 gallons of gasoline. It is eminently clear that if the United States supports the Vietnamese body while the Viet Cong feeds the Vietnamese mind, the enemy could win in the long run. Virtually every responsible Vietnamese will confirm this

analysis of the relative importance of material and "spiritual" factors. The United States must provide leadership, encouragement, inspiration, even more than guns and butter. If it does not provide these leadership factors, it cannot be sure of buying victory with material inputs.

Another flaw in concept of unlimited material support lies in the definitely limited Vietnamese ability to absorb and digest such support. Every American going to the USOM costs the GVN 1 million piasters per year in housekeeping expenses. Every MAAG advisor sent to the provinces ties up a large portion of the time of Vietnamese officers. In many provinces, the Province Chief has a very small staff which can hardly function under the deluge of resident or visiting Americans. The United States structure in Vietnam already has people writing reports about reports. Every bureaucratic requirement imposed by one or another U.S. echelon ultimately is a burden on the Vietnamese who must supply the background information while trying to win a war. Vietnam is a small, under-developed country trying to cope all at once with internal revolution, modernization of all its institutions and a savage enemy. Under the circumstances, it is doing extraordinarily well, but already there are indications that it has to pay a very high price indeed for the privilege of receiving American aid.

One last observation - the United States has never lost a war yet. Presumably by total intervention - it could impose its will upon the territory of Vietnam. Indeed such might prove necessary in an escalated war in Southeast Asia. But I submit that there is no long-term American solution to the situation in Vietnam. There is only a Vietnamese solution, for the simple reason that the Vietnamese live permanently in that area and we do not. Some day we must withdraw our forces and we must leave stable and self-sustaining anti-Communists forces behind. I, therefore, suggest that the creation of an ultimately viable Vietnamese state - primarily a political and psychological challenge - has been, is and will remain the number one task of the United States in Vietnam, and that this fact has to be recognized at all times in the planning and execution of United States policy.